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White-Tailed Deer on the Prairie

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the fortieth issue of the *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, devoted to rural, northern, and Indigenous education. Our authors for volume 17 are current and past BU Faculty of Education graduate students. I thank these educators for sharing their professional experiences.

- Rory McIntyre's refereed article explores student assessment in vocational education classrooms.
- Kristina Mateychuk's refereed article advocates teacher training to support high school students who have mental health challenges.
- Amanda Impey's refereed article examines the causes and potential solutions to teacher burnout.
- Laryssa Kawaler's refereed article investigates student absenteeism and how to address it.
- Adam Dyck's refereed article discusses the role of school administrators in securing inclusive education in the school and classroom.
- Deanne Kuehn's refereed article stresses risky unstructured play as essential to nurturing social, emotional, and cognitive development in children.
- Fritzgerald Villanueva's refereed article contemplates a three-tiered model of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) as a guide for developing supports for children with early onset schizophrenia.
- Alyssa Spacek's refereed article emphasizes teacher well-being as essential to fostering effective pedagogy, meaningful student connections, and positive educational outcomes.
- Leslie Howard's special interest paper holds schools accountable for countering the microaggressions, macroaggressions, and violence that characterize trans students' experiences in school.

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Considerations for Assessment in Vocational Education

Rory McIntyre

Abstract

Vocational teachers must address provincial curricular outcomes, vocational accreditation requirements, and current vocational practices in their teaching and assessment. In doing so, they must prepare their students for the written summative assessments required for trade certification while teaching the students the technical skills necessary for the workplace. This literature review examines several strategies that a vocational teacher can consider while developing a comprehensive assessment program, such as using formative assessment methods, incorporating competence-based educational approaches, and maintaining authenticity in assessment.

While theoretical knowledge is essential in academic disciplines such as social studies, the sciences, mathematics, and English language arts, success in vocational education and training (VET) also requires mastering technical skills and applying them in real-world vocational settings (Suhaini et al., 2021). Vocational teachers must account for this in their assessments, while adhering to both institutionally dictated learning outcomes and current vocational standards of practice (De Vos et al., 2024). Using formative assessment methods to achieve this balance can present challenges in its implementation, but it more closely resembles the assessment and feedback processes found in the workplace in comparison to summative assessments that characterize core academic school subjects (Sandal, 2023). Instead of relying on standardized summative assessment practices based in academic pedagogy, vocational teachers can use a competence-based education (CBE) model to teach and assess more effectively (Sandal, 2023, p. 664). Providing authentic learning experiences can connect instruction to the assessments for students and have a positive effect on their learning (Gulikers et al., 2004). This leaves the vocational teacher with the task of creating a comprehensive system of assessment that is fair, flexible, valid, and reliable while navigating the dichotomy of academic requirements and vocational practices (Rusconi, 2024). Effective assessment is vital, because it gives the teacher a way to provide the feedback students will need to succeed in the classroom and their vocational careers.

Formative Assessment

Assessment of learning in a vocational setting is a complicated and socially oriented process that needs active participation from both the teacher and the student (De Vos et al., 2024). A vocational teacher using formative assessment strategies in this type of learning environment needs to use immediate feedback with students, requiring the teacher to allot time in their lesson plans for these important conversations (Sandal, 2023). After providing feedback, the teacher can then direct students to the next steps that would be expected in a workplace environment. The teacher must then use their professional judgment to decide whether to guide the student through the following task directly or to provide the student the opportunity to practise independently (De Vos et al., 2024). A possible complication of this in-the-moment formative assessment process is that some of these key teachable moments cannot always be planned and require spontaneous learning. Another important component of the formative assessment process is for students to evaluate the quality of their own work and review this self-assessment with the teacher (Sandal, 2023). However, not all students are interested in

debriefing with the teacher after the work and self-reflection are completed. Teachers who are unprepared for the additional workload of using formative assessment in their teaching practice may find themselves unable to use it to its full potential.

Formative assessment in education can be defined as any methods that are used to identify where a student might have difficulties, misunderstandings, or missed learning opportunities (Earl et al., 2015). Examples of how formative assessment can be used in a VET classroom include clearly communicating expectations to students, giving descriptive and prescriptive feedback with the aim of improving future performance, providing multiple attempts to complete a task, encouraging peer reviews of performance, and having students perform self-assessments (Black & Wiliam, 2009). There are also socially-oriented methods of assessment that resemble feedback in the workplace, such as peer reviews, the use of benchmarks, and assessments by committee that place importance on a collective responsibility for assessment (Räisänen & Räkköläinen, 2014). A formative learning moment occurs when a student is exposed to some form of interactive event or incident and the feedback received from this leads to the student learning new knowledge or skills (Black & Wiliam, 2009). Students typically show greater motivation and passion toward formative assessments than summative assessments because they gain knowledge from the assessment and not just in preparation for the assessment (Gulikers et al., 2018). Continued active involvement in the formative assessment process by the teacher also creates a greater catalyst for learning when the assessments are based in established vocational practices and the teacher uses the assessment feedback to identify gaps in learning (Tigelaar & Sins, 2021). Formative assessment techniques can provide deeper learning opportunities for students and better prepare them for the feedback that they will be receiving in the workplace.

Competence-Based Education

Vocational education teachers are required to assess with two different philosophies, vocation-based formative assessment, and academic-based summative assessment methods. Unfortunately, many academic assessment practices are not suited to VET, and academic pedagogy often dictates a school's culture regarding assessment (Sandal, 2023). Many of the assessment tools used in schools, such as written tests, come from an academic background and do not always work well in VET. Given their dual role as both a teacher and a vocational expert, vocational teachers must choose whether to conduct their assessments using written tests or evaluating technical skills found in the vocation (De Vos et al., 2024). The push to emphasize academic testing instead of using practical tests frustrates many vocational teachers, particularly when school administrators are not aware of the issues surrounding assessment in vocational education. Too often, the purpose of written testing is for documentation of objective assessment instead of measuring student learning (Suhaini et al., 2021). The rift between vocational and academic education can lead to a focus on meeting arbitrary academic standards rather than learning the competencies required in the vocation (Loo, 2018). Academic assessments in VET should be balanced with assessments of technical skills and vocational competencies, to ensure that all relevant abilities are considered in the assessment process.

An alternative to basing VET on the completion of a list of curricular outcomes is to assess it by workplace competence, moving towards a CBE model. Competence-based assessment is used to connect theoretical learning in the classroom to the skills required to succeed in the workplace (Baartman et al., 2013). Competence is defined as the ability to achieve an industry-standard performance in a specific workplace context and is assessed by examining the skill of the student completing vocational tasks (Griffin et al., 2007). Five important qualities of competence in CBE are that it concentrates on performance in relation to the final product, implies meeting workplace quality standards, can be described as observed behaviours, uses

an assessment standard that does not depend on the performance of peers, and communicates expectations to students (Wesselink et al., 2017).

Developing CBE requires specifying essential tasks in VET, to ensure that learning and assessment are relevant to both the school and the workplace. Clearly communicating the standards of assessment based on workplace competencies is crucial for students to enable them to focus on using those competencies in the classroom on a regular basis in preparation for future summative assessments (Baartman et al., 2013). Evaluations conducted by supervisors or managers during workplace practicums are an effective and authentic method of assessing competence. Using CBE in a VET setting has been shown to improve student motivation and engagement (Wesselink et al., 2017). By applying its assessment principles, VET teachers can foster student learning while guiding them towards the technical skills and performance standards required in the workplace.

Authenticity in Assessment

By focusing on authenticity in assessment instead of reliability, VET can better prepare students for their future after graduation (Gulikers et al., 2018). Creating an authentic vocational learning environment requires specific knowledge, skills, and processes (De Vos et al., 2024). The quality of the assessment of technical skills in VET depends on the context of the student performance (Räisänen & Räkköläinen, 2014). However, a workplace skill performed in isolation does not guarantee that it is an authentic assessment of competence and can limit its usefulness (Gulikers et al., 2004). Moreover, if practical tests and workplace evaluations are included in the summative assessments but the testing environment is too controlled, the assessment results might not translate to the workplace (Baartman et al., 2013). On the other hand, creating contextualized skill assessments can compromise the reliability of the assessment because it is difficult to achieve reliability in assessing vocational competence (Griffin et al., 2007).

Balancing authenticity and reliability in assessment is essential. Overemphasizing reliability can lead to assessments that are overly standardized and disconnected from the practical realities of the workplace (Räisänen & Räkköläinen, 2014). While it requires additional planning and preparation by the teacher, the increased subjectivity of using a more authentic competence-based assessment can be reduced by having the details of the assessment procedure communicated clearly, describing how the assessment will affect learning, and connecting the assessment task to the workplace (Baartman et al., 2013). In addition to planning and creating the assessment materials, VET teachers have the additional challenge of conducting their assessments in an authentic context that will provide a rich learning experience for their students.

Authentic competence-based assessment seeks to develop deeper understanding and relevant technical skills, instead of having students recite rote information and copy isolated skills (Gulikers et al., 2004). Authentic assessment prioritizes the pragmatic aspects of student performance while remaining faithful to the context of the workplace. Skill assessments that resemble real workplace conditions are more authentic for both the student and the teacher (Räisänen & Räkköläinen, 2014), demonstrating essential workplace skills not found in the school curriculum (Service Canada, 2022). VET teachers can ensure that the variable and subjective aspects of their authentic assessments are more consistent by using tools such as rubrics and participating in regular professional development to calibrate assessment standards with other vocational teachers and experts (Gulikers et al., 2018).

Authentic assessment should also consider the social dimension of workplace performance and include professional workplace feedback from supervisors during work practicums (Baartman et al., 2013). This will not only improve authenticity, but may also foster better relationships with industry partners and encourage them to consider school assessment results in their hiring practices (Baartman et al., 2013). An authentic assessment process should

communicate the expectations of the assessment to the students, because this resembles the communication process in the workplace between employees and their supervisors (Gulikers et al., 2004). Incorporating authenticity into VET is an effective strategy to ensure that curriculum, instruction, and assessment are designed to complement the workplace context.

Comprehensive Assessment Program

Since school and workplace learning exist as a continuum in VET due to the interconnected nature of theory and practice, a comprehensive assessment program is needed to address all levels of vocational knowledge (Loo, 2018). This program should incorporate traditional written testing, conduct technical skills assessments, include workplace or practicum evaluations, assess both the processes and products of student performances, and combine both summative and formative assessment methods (Gulikers et al., 2018). In a fully developed CBE program, assessments occur before, during, and after learning takes place to determine whether there have been any improvements to the students' competence (Wesselink et al., 2017). Vocational knowledge exists across a spectrum, so students should be evaluated across the entire range of vocational knowledge (Baartman et al., 2013). The four levels of competence-based knowledge – knows, knows how, shows how, and does – demonstrate the increasing complexity of professional competence (Miller, 1990). An example of an assessment from each level would be a multiple-choice test, answering questions about a case study scenario, performing an isolated technical skill, and performing several authentic vocational tasks in a workplace setting. Vocational competence consists of a large body of vocational knowledge, a variety of technical skills, and a foundation of essential workplace skills, and thus requires an extensive assessment program to evaluate it.

Conclusion

Assessment in VET must account for both the theoretical knowledge and technical skills required of students to succeed in their vocation. The complex nature of vocational and workplace learning can make formative assessment a challenging process for teachers, but it can provide students with valuable feedback (De Vos et al., 2024). Emphasizing vocational competence in teaching and using authentic forms of assessment are required to move beyond standardized summative assessments towards ones that foster deeper learning in the vocational context (Gulikers et al., 2004). Clearly communicated curricular outcomes, vocational competencies, comprehensive performance portfolios, and workplace evaluations can improve authentic assessment while simultaneously increasing student engagement (Ecclestone, 2007). Vocational education is a unique combination of theory-based learning and competence, making the assessment of vocational learning equally distinctive.

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The Crisis of Inadequate Teacher Training for Supporting Mental Health in Rural Manitoba High School Classrooms

Kristina Mateychuk

Abstract

Teachers are insufficiently prepared to address the rising mental health challenges among high school students in rural Manitoba, negatively impacting student engagement, academic success, and teacher well-being. Although teachers are often the first point of contact for students struggling with mental health issues, typical interventions are reactive rather than preventive, relying on specialist-led programs instead of building mental health literacy among general educators. Advocating policy changes at the provincial level and including mental health literacy training in teacher education programs, alongside accessible, well-funded professional development, is critical to fostering a supportive learning environment that benefits both students and educators.

Students in high schools across Manitoba increasingly face mental health challenges that affect not only their personal lives but also their behaviour in school and their level of academic success. At my school, with a relatively small student population of about a hundred students, a significant number struggle with mental health challenges such as debilitating anxiety, depression, obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), early psychosis, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), self-harm, and suicidal ideation. In my position as a resource teacher, I have observed that at least 20% of our student body struggles with mental health. This aligns with national statistics showing that one in five students, or 20%, experience mental health challenges that can significantly impact their educational experience (School-Based Mental Health and Substance Abuse Consortium, 2013, p. 1).

This issue of increasing mental health challenges faced by high school students is not unique to my school. Rural communities across the province are seeing similar trends with many students struggling without support due to limited access to mental health resources (Chartier et al., 2019). This often places pressure on teachers to act as the primary point of support for students with mental health concerns (Rodger et al., 2014). However, despite growing awareness of the lack of access to mental health resources and the importance of mental health in schools, teacher training for effectively supporting these students in the classroom is critically insufficient.

Teacher preparation programs focus on traditional pedagogical skills, with little emphasis on building capacity for teachers to manage complex mental health issues that are increasingly common in the classroom. Current interventions are largely reactive rather than preventive (Rodger et al., 2014) and are designed for specialists rather than the teachers who are typically on the frontlines and involved with students the most (Manitoba Association of School Superintendents [MASS], 2019). There is a significant gap in programming for intervention and treatment within schools, which leaves many students without the support they need (MASS, 2015) and, while “little research has been published to investigate the mental health implications for teachers since COVID-19" (Ferguson et al., 2022, p. 24), it is reasonable to assume that student mental health challenges likely contribute to feelings of stress for the teacher and may be a contributing factor to the high rates of teacher turnover and burnout.

The correlation between mental health and academic success indicates the systemic problem of inadequate and insufficient mental health training for educators in rural Manitoba high schools. Targeted solutions that include effective teacher preparation and ongoing professional development are crucial to ensure that educators have the tools and capacity to support students’ mental health and academic success.

The Training Gap for Mental Health Support

Poor mental health significantly impacts students' cognitive abilities, hindering their ability to engage effectively with learning. Mental health issues such as anxiety, depression, and ADHD often disrupt concentration, impair memory retention, and limit problem-solving skills, making academic tasks more difficult or even impossible to complete successfully (Singh & Goswami, 2016). When students are struggling with mental health challenges, their ability to focus during class diminishes, making it harder to absorb new information and apply it to assignments. This cognitive decline can severely compromise their academic performance, contributing to lower grades and diminished motivation to learn.

In addition to these cognitive challenges, poor mental health is closely linked to problematic school behaviours such as disengagement, absenteeism, and incomplete homework-all of which further contribute to lower academic achievement. Duncan et al. (2021) noted that students experiencing mental health difficulties often withdraw from school activities, skip classes, or fail to complete homework, creating a cycle of underachievement. As students fall behind academically, their sense of self-efficacy may decrease, leading to even more disengagement from the educational process. Recent research indicates that students with mental illnesses are less likely to graduate (Leanage & Rubab Arim, 2024), which illustrates how mental health issues and academic struggles are intertwined, each feeding and amplifying the other.

Mental health support in schools is critically important, yet many teacher training programs across Canada fall short in equipping educators to address students' mental health challenges effectively. These programs typically emphasize general classroom management and subject-specific teaching methods, dedicating minimal attention to the specialized skills required for mental health support. Consequently, many educators enter classrooms unprepared to recognize, support, and intervene when students face mental health difficulties.

Brown et al. (2019) drew attention to this gap in a comparative study of teacher preparation programs across North America, stating that "extensive literature emphasizes the necessity of teacher preparation in school mental health" (p. 79). Despite this recognized need, most Canadian teacher education programs fail to incorporate mental health training into their curricula. Only one Canadian province includes mental health content for senior-year educators, and only two provinces mandate the development of basic preventive skills related to student mental health (Brown et al., 2019). This significant lack of uniformity and emphasis leaves many teachers ill equipped to manage mental health challenges.

The report Mental Health Education in Canada, prepared for Physical and Health Education Canada, supports these findings, emphasizing that teachers often feel under prepared to address mental health issues among students (Rodger et al., 2014). Mental health-related training is typically reserved for specialist teachers, such as school counsellors and resource teachers, rather than being integrated in the broader training for all educators (Brown et al., 2019). However, there is a related misconception that specialist teachers in rural schools have received additional training. Rural schools often face staffing challenges and limited access to trained professionals, leaving general teachers, such as myself, without comprehensive training in mental health care. Inadequate training leaves teachers with minimal support, especially when dealing with complex mental health issues like anxiety, early psychosis, and self-harm. Learning how to manage these concerns while they are happening can be challenging, especially when still teaching a full course load, and can contribute to teacher stress and burnout (Chan, 2024).

Furthermore, interventions tend to be reactive rather than preventive. In one school in my division, a specialized Student Directed Learning Program was introduced to support a small group of students with mental health challenges. The program offered a dedicated school space, modular-type course content across all subject areas, with minimal attendance expectations to accommodate student needs. However, it did not involve regular school-wide

training and has only been minimally extended to other schools in the division, even though mental health is a challenge across the catchment area. This initiative illustrates not only the inequity experienced by rural students but also the prioritization of exclusion and specialist intervention over school-wide capacity building. A similar initiative by Winnipeg School Division, the Anxiety Management Program, removes students from school for extended periods of time so that students can participate in intensive therapy sessions. This program also highlights a level of inequity in that out of about 950 students enrolled in senior grades 7 through 12 (Winnipeg School Division, 2023, para. 8), only 19 were enrolled this year (Macintosh, 2024, para. 15). If general teachers are excluded from the process, these initiatives isolate the students and place an additional burden on the teachers who are often left unaware of the specific needs and strategies to support the students upon their return.

While some might argue that mental health is a field best left to specialists, it is crucial to recognize that teachers are uniquely positioned to identify and support students who struggle with mental health issues. Teachers spend significant time with students, observing their behaviour, academic performance, and social interactions, and are often the first to notice subtle changes that may indicate mental health concerns. Training in mental health should be mandatory for all teacher candidates because educators play a vital role in early intervention, prevention, and ongoing support for students in need. However, teachers often resort to trial and error in attempting to address students' mental health needs due to a lack of formal training and mental health literacy, which can result in inconsistent outcomes (Deaton et al., 2022, Abstract). This absence of comprehensive mental health training leaves students vulnerable both academically and socially.

The lack of trained mental health professionals, combined with the limited scope of teacher training, contributes to a cycle of inadequate support for students — with potentially lasting effects on their academic achievement and overall well-being. In rural schools, teachers are often expected to fill this gap, yet they are not equipped with the tools or training necessary to manage these complex issues effectively (Brown et al., 2019). This reality highlights the urgent need for comprehensive teacher training in mental health, particularly in rural communities, to ensure educators can proactively recognize and address students' mental health needs. Strengthening teacher preparation in this area would not only improve student outcomes but also reduce the strain on teachers — enhancing their effectiveness and helping to prevent burnout, which is increasingly common in rural school settings.

Integrating Mental Health Literacy Into Teacher Education: A Path Forward

To address the mental health challenges faced by students, especially in rural areas, mental health literacy training during teacher preparation programs is crucial. Currently, Western University in London, Ontario, offers the first and only mandatory mental health literacy course for teacher candidates in Canada. This 10-week evidence-based course supports teacher candidates in understanding mental health and supporting student well-being by exploring topics such as behavioural and emotional concerns in the classroom and the impact of mental illness on student learning and well-being (Centre for School Mental Health, n.d.). Established in 2016, this course serves as a model for universities across Canada, emphasizing the need to provide training before teachers enter the profession and are overwhelmed by its demands.

I have been advised by a professor at Brandon University, Dr. Ellen Watson, that I could formally highlight the need for mental health training by writing a letter to the Dean of Education. However, only faculty members within the relevant specialty area can propose new courses, which must then be approved by the department, faculty, and senate (E. Watson, personal communication, November 26, 2024). To face this challenge, teachers who are in positions like mine could form a working committee to advocate collectively for changes. This committee

could draft formal letters to the University's dean of education, faculty members, department heads, and provincial Department of Education, proposing a mandatory mental health course or increased emphasis on mental health literacy within existing undergraduate university courses such as Professional Teacher, Behaviour Management, and Adolescent Development.

Without adequate university training, teachers are often left struggling to address the increasing mental health concerns in their classrooms. Fortunately, mental health resources are available online to integrate mental health literacy into classroom lessons. For instance, School Mental Health Ontario offers a Mental Health Literacy Course for Educators to those employed by publicly funded school boards in Ontario (School Mental Health Ontario, 2019). Similarly, the University of British Columbia provides a free modular course accessible to educators across Canada (LEARN, 2019). In Nova Scotia, educators benefit from the School Mental Health (SchoolsPlus, 2022) initiative, which offers mental health and addictions education for school staff. However, similar resources are scarce in Manitoba, where a dedicated portal for on-demand training would be an invaluable asset for educators.

Professional development opportunities, such as those offered by the Crisis and Trauma Resource Institute and the Mental Health Commission of Canada, often involve participant fees. These financial burdens, coupled with the significant time commitments required, can be challenging for many teachers without accommodations such as substitute coverage or monetary compensation. The lack of adequate mental health preparation in university teacher education programs shifts the responsibility to school divisions, which are not always willing or able to prioritize funding for necessary training.

Some rural divisions, such as the Prairie Spirit School Division (PSSD), have included mental health indicators under the category of Engagement within their Strategic Action Plans. In the case of PSSD, the plan requires educators in student support positions to obtain or pursue a master's degree, yet the responsibility for addressing student mental health continues to rest primarily with classroom teachers, even though teacher training in mental health is not prioritized (PSSD, 2024). Research shows that teachers feel "challenged and restricted in their capacity to support mental health due to the demanding workload of their core professional role, the volume of students they support, and lack of available time" (Mazzer & Rickwood, 2015, p. 35). This indicates that additional demands can interfere with essential responsibilities such as planning and assessment. Furthermore, this Strategic Action Plan may leave requests for mental health resources unlikely to align with divisional priorities. This disconnect underscores the need for stakeholders and administration to align strategic expectations with the practical realities faced by teachers.

Last year, I participated in a successful advocacy initiative that secured funding and time for teachers to integrate Indigenous inclusion in our schools. Our group conducted a needs assessment, drafted a formal report on the current state of Indigenous inclusion, and presented our findings to the board. This effort led to support for training and resource development. A similar approach could be used to advocate for mental health literacy training for teachers. Manitoba Education provides resources such as *Schools as a Setting for Promoting Positive Mental Health: Better Practices and Perspectives* (Joint Consortium for School Mental Health, 2010), an 80-page document that could serve as a valuable reference and foundation for such a delegation.

Conclusion

In my role as a resource teacher, I have encountered students facing severe anxiety, OCD, psychosis, and escalating self-harm within just the past three months. Balancing these responsibilities while supporting students with autism spectrum disorder and other exceptionalities, alongside a 0.5 FTE teaching load, has underscored the critical need for systemic support. Many educators face similar challenges without adequate training, leaving them overwhelmed and underprepared. Incorporating mental health training into teacher

education programs while holding school divisions and the Province of Manitoba accountable for providing sufficient training, would foster a more supportive learning environment for both students and teachers. Such a holistic approach could not only enhance student well-being but also reduce the stress and burnout experienced by educators, particularly in rural school settings.

Mental health significantly impacts student behaviour, well-being, and academic success, yet many teachers lack the necessary training to provide effective support. The growing number of students facing mental health challenges in Manitoba high schools, particularly in rural areas, further highlights the need for systemic reforms at the provincial and school division levels to ensure adequate support for both teachers and students. A proactive, inclusive approach to mental health education in schools would foster environments wherein students couild thrive, and teachers could perform their roles without undue stress or burnout. Mandatory mental health literacy training in teacher education programs, paired with accessible, well-funded professional development opportunities, would better equip educators. This holistic strategy would not only improve student outcomes, but also alleviate the pressures on educators, particularly in rural communities.

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Early Teacher Burnout: A Growing Reality

Amanda Impey

Abstract

Novice teachers, specifically those in their first five years, are leaving the teaching profession at an escalating rate. Demands that go beyond teaching and assessing curriculum in the classroom are piling up and becoming unattainable. Not only are teachers experiencing heavy workloads that require them to combine work with their personal lives, but it is accompanied by emotional strain and a lack of support. This leads to stress and burnout, and ultimately to many leaving the career. Alleviating such stress can come from adding supports, prioritizing mental health and well-being, and reducing administrative expectations that go beyond the workday.

Teaching attracts passionate, caring, and selfless individuals who are dedicated to the success of students and to creating an enjoyment for learning. It is a demanding but rewarding job. Although the rewards may not be felt each day, there is no denying the positive impact teachers make in the lives of students. But at what cost? Teaching has been ranked one of the top professions to have the highest turnover rate, particularly new teachers in their first five years (Jones & Ali, 2021). The role of a teacher comes with an increasing number of demands that go beyond the four walls of the classroom. These demands that stretch past creating lesson plans are often what create fond memories of school, but they are also the leading cause of stress and burnout amongst young teachers, overpowering the joy and passion that led many to the job. To find solutions to keep dedicated teachers in schools for long, rewarding careers, we must better understand what contributes to their stress. Once the causes are more deeply understood, solutions can be put in place that support teachers to manage students in their classrooms, set realistic expectations for their workload, and prioritize their mental health and well-being. Focusing on solutions will encourage long-lasting healthy careers for teachers.

Leading Causes of Burnout

The leading causes contributing to burnout and novice teachers leaving the profession include heavy workload, lack of support, and emotional strain. The responsibilities of a teacher stretch far past creating lesson plans and are piling up into unsustainable workloads. Teachers do not have enough time during the workday to meet all expectations (Lin et al., 2024). Some of these demands are put on teachers by themselves as they strive to achieve the highest standards for both them and their students. This includes hours spent marking, emailing parents, researching subject material, creating PowerPoints and engaging lessons, shopping for materials, and creating modified assignments for students with differing academic abilities and cognitive or behavioural challenges. It is no surprise these jobs must be done during personal hours because there is not enough time in the workday to complete these tasks and complete them well. However, many demands are pushed on staff by administrators. Schools want to create an abundance of academic and social opportunities for students in hopes they will have the best possible school experience, and these opportunities all come from experiences outside classroom learning. Extra hours expected of teachers include supervising before and after school events, covering for other teachers, supervising hallways during class transitions, lunch supervision both indoors and outdoors, coaching sports teams, producing drama productions, supervising out of school trips, running numerous clubs, setting up and tearing down for school-wide events, as well as attending before and after school staff meetings and parent-teacher nights (Lin et al., 2024). When teachers lose sense of their work-life balance, they lose the ability to show up mindfully to support their students' academic and social-emotional needs (Eva, 2022). For many educators, especially those in their first five years of teaching, these

heavy workload demands become overwhelmingly time consuming and, as a result, are pushing an increasing number of teachers out of the profession at a growing rate (Hailey, 2024).

As the demands of teachers continue to increase, it is school administrators who play a vital role in putting supports in place for teachers to manage these demands confidently and effectively. However, many teachers find themselves feeling unsupported and working in an unpleasant school environment. Common factors that lead to burnout and declined enjoyment of teaching include out-of-field job assignments and lack of collaboration opportunities, resources, and professional development (Hobbs & Quinn, 2020). A study of 74 primary and high school teachers found that a variety of factors, many of which are in control of school administrators, contributed to stress and general unhappiness amongst school staff (Carroll et al., 2020). Effective leadership is essential when cultivating a motivating school culture composed of collaboration and communication. When these pillars are lacking, morale and interpersonal staff relationships decline (Carroll et al., 2020). Teaching comes with many demands to meet the needs of all students, parents and staff. Without effective leadership to cultivate a community of support and connection, these demands from administrators begin to weigh negatively on teaching staff in the form of stress and burnout.

A major cause of emotional stress for teachers stems from managing a wide range of academic and language learning abilities, and a growing number of students with behavioural challenges. Differing abilities amongst students are to be expected in all classrooms, but the lack of support and proper training provided to teachers is creating emotional strain. Fernet et al. (2014) examined what dims the fire that brings passionate educators into the field and then pushes them to leave the profession within their first five years. Psychological investment has been a big contributor to individuals incorporating their job into their identity, which leads to an obsessive passion for the job (Fernet et al.), but this enthusiasm can quickly erode due to student defiance, swearing, disrespect to both classmates and adults, physical altercations, and cyberbullying that have become normal day-to-day classroom issues. Managing such behavioural issues while being expected to provide high quality and engaging learning experiences for a class of thirty-plus students creates insurmountable emotional strain on teachers (Jamil et al., 2021).

Additionally, Canada has seen a growing number of immigrant and refugee students entering their schools with little to no English language skills. Expecting teachers to meet the specific needs of English language learners and their families with limited training (if any at all) is an unsuccessful plan from the start (Flint et al., 2018). There is a place for these students to succeed in every classroom, but teachers must be provided with the necessary training and other supports, including manageable workloads, to avoid debilitating stress as they scramble to make these students not only to understand the basics to get through school day routines but also to engage meaningfully with their classmates and in their own learning.

Targeted Solutions to Teacher Burnout

To address the issue of young educators leaving the teaching profession at a growing rate, a focus must be placed on solutions that enable teachers to sustain their passion and joy of teaching for long, rewarding careers. Solutions include providing supports for teachers to manage the range of student academic and behavioural needs in their classrooms, prioritizing the mental health and well-being of school staff, and reducing administrative expectations to create a sustainable work-life balance for teachers, specifically those in their first five years of teaching (Fernet et al., 2014). Knowing that the emotionally demanding and time-consuming aspects of teaching are leading many educators to leave the profession, we must look at opportunities in the workplace to mitigate these feelings of stress and burnout. Although everyone has their own unique teaching experience, there are commonalities among those who end up leaving the profession. Adding supports for teachers to meet students' growing academic and behavioural needs, prioritizing staff mental health and well-being, and reducing

administrative expectations for teachers to create a healthy and sustainable work-life balance are means to change the negative trajectory of novice teachers.

To ensure that all students are receiving the best possible education and to lessen the emotional strain on teachers, schools must examine their allocation of available resources. Resource teachers, counsellors, teacher librarians, educational assistants, and divisional consultants and grants are valuable assets to meet the needs of EAL students and those with learning gaps or behavioural challenges, rather than relying solely on the classroom teacher (Carroll et al., 2020). By taking an all-hands-on-deck approach, teachers will feel supported in providing the best strategies to meet all students' needs, rather than feeling overwhelmed and hopeless. Administrators and staff in the building are responsible for working together to support all staff and students.

A focal point to bring teachers back to their purpose for entering the profession and fire their passion depends on cultivating a positive and motivating school community. Staff morale is a driving force for intrinsic motivation, which drives teachers to show up to work each day (Marshall et al., 2022). Of the many factors that affect staff morale, the most influential is effective leadership by administrators. Cultivating a welcoming, supportive, and enjoyable work environment will improve staff morale across the building, making teachers excited and motivated not only to go to work but to show up as their best self for their students. Other ways to raise staff morale can be as simple as organizing outings with colleagues, providing coffee in the staff room, scheduling time for collaboration between staff members, and planning opportunities to recognizing staff members for their hard work and dedication (Carroll et al., 2020). Increased staff morale will naturally follow added supports for teachers, which is a necessity for improving the mental health, well-being, and work-life balance of teachers.

The excessive work demands placed on teachers must be lowered (Brady et al., 2021). Administrators can reduce burnout by resetting expectations for the roles and responsibilities of teachers to more reasonable ones that can be completed during the workday or ones that teachers are passionate about. With a smaller number of demands, teachers can instead focus on school initiatives or teaching methodologies they care about rather than trying to take on too much without the proper professional development to do it well. Adding supports for teachers, prioritizing staff mental health and well-being, and reducing administrative expectations to create a sustainable work-life balance ensures that more teachers will continue to feel the passion and intrinsic motivation that led them to their student-centred career.

Conclusion

Growing demands such as heavy workloads, lack of support, and emotional strain from trying to meet the diverse needs of students are overwhelming teachers and pushing many novice teachers out of the profession. From motivated, passionate educators to burnt out employees, it is those who are most passionate and motivated when entering the career who are most susceptible to burnout and struggles with work-life balance (Fernet et al., 2014), precipitating lacklustre performance that precedes leaving the profession. To alleviate these pressures, a focus must be put on solutions such as adding supports for teachers to meet students' academic and behavioural needs, prioritizing staff mental health and well-being, and reducing administrative expectations for teachers. Students, families, and communities will benefit from prioritizing solutions to enhance the well-being of teachers and ensure continued enjoyment and fulfilment in their jobs. Teachers enter the profession because they want to see students succeed academically, enhance their social-emotional learning, and provide as many positive school experiences for them and their families as possible. Teaching attracts selfless caring individuals, so we must ensure that workplaces are set up with sustainable expectations for teachers to continue to make a positive impact on students during long, rewarding careers.

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About the Author

Amanda Impey has been teaching middle school for seven years. She entered the M.Ed. program to continue learning strategies to show up in the best way possible for all students. Amanda loves to be active and bring that into student learning!

From Absence to Attendance: Addressing the Root Causes of School Absenteeism

Laryssa Kawaler

Abstract

Student absenteeism profoundly impacts academic achievement, emotional well-being, and social development. The root causes of absenteeism are diverse, encompassing personal struggles, family responsibilities, social pressures, and unengaging or unsupportive school environments. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach, including early identification, fostering inclusive school cultures, and implementing targeted interventions. Manitoba, Canada's Safe and Caring Schools *policy provides a structured framework to tackle absenteeism, focusing on fostering inclusive, supportive environments and addressing barriers through collaboration and targeted interventions. By implementing preventative measures and individualized support, schools can enhance student engagement, improve attendance, and ensure equitable access to education for all learners.*

Student absenteeism is a significant challenge that affects academic performance, emotional well-being, social development, and long-term success for students. A variety of factors contribute to why students miss school, including personal struggles such as mental health issues, family responsibilities, social pressures, and disengaging curriculum or unsupportive school environments. Another factor that contributes to student absenteeism is school refusal, a complex psychological issue whereby students experience intense anxiety about attending school. Addressing absenteeism requires a multifaceted approach that considers the diverse needs of students and their unique circumstances. Strategies such as identifying attendance patterns early, fostering culturally responsive teaching practices, and incorporating Social Emotional Learning (SEL) are critical to creating a safe, inclusive, and engaging school environment. In Manitoba, Canada, the provincial government has introduced the *Safe and Caring Schools* policy to tackle student absenteeism and foster an inclusive and supportive learning environment (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). This policy aims to ensure regular attendance and active engagement, promoting student success across the province. By understanding and addressing the root causes of absenteeism, educators can help to re-engage students and build a foundation for consistent attendance and academic achievement.

Overview of Student Absenteeism

Several factors contribute to student absenteeism: personal, family, social, and school-related factors all play a role. Personal factors that impact a student's attendance and engagement with school can include underlying mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, and trauma (Lewis de-los Angeles et al., 2023). While mental health concerns like anxiety and depression are significant contributors to absenteeism, other external factors, such as family responsibilities or socio-economic stressors, can also have a profound impact on attendance (Balkis et al., 2018). Family-related factors contribute to excessive absences, such as family conflicts, socio-economic challenges, and family responsibilities including caring for younger siblings or older students having to work part-time jobs to offer financial support for the family. Additionally, peer pressure and social dynamics can increase disengagement and school absenteeism. School-related factors that negatively impact students' engagement include unsupportive and unsafe school environments, lack of connection building between teacher and student, and unengaging, outdated, and irrelevant curriculum. To reduce student absenteeism,

we must address the wide range of personal, family, social, and school-related factors that impact students' attendance and engagement.

Extended absences pose a significant challenge to the academic and social development of students and can start early in a child's life. Some children may experience intense anxiety and distress about attending school, which is a complex psychological issue called "school refusal" (Sinha, 2021, p. 485). School refusal is characterized by a child's opposition to leave their feeling of safety at home, resulting in significant emotional upset and dysregulation with the idea of having to go to school. Students who refuse to go to school often do this as a coping mechanism to escape environments that they perceive as unsafe, threatening, or overwhelming (Baker & Bishop, 2015). It is important to understand that school refusal is not simply an act of defiance or bad behaviour, but rather a complex psychological response (Lewis de-los Angeles et al., 2023). Neurodivergent youth may be more prone to school refusal due to sensory sensitivities, social discomfort, and increased academic-related anxiety, which ultimately results in the school environment feeling overstimulating and emotionally challenging (Granieri et al., 2023). Addressing the root causes of school refusal is crucial to foster an environment wherein all students feel safe and supported.

Students from various backgrounds face unique challenges that can influence their school attendance in a negative way. Students from low socio-economic backgrounds are at higher risk for frequent absences, because there is an increase in financial pressures, limited access to essential resources, and the need to assist with family responsibilities (Fredriksson et al. 2024). Recent newcomer students display higher rates of school absenteeism, which can stem from cultural and language barriers, feelings of social isolation, and lack of parental involvement in their schooling. In addition, Fredriksson et al.'s (2024) study found that boys are more likely to struggle with attendance compared to girls, due to differences in academic engagement, motivation, and social pressures. Recognizing and understanding the factors that lead to school absenteeism among these different groups of students is essential for creating a supportive environment that promotes attendance and academic success.

Student absenteeism is a complicated and complex issue that requires a wide range of diverse supports. The adults involved in the student's life need to collaborate and come to an understanding as to why the student is struggling with attendance, but different professionals in schools, such as teachers, social workers, and psychologists, often have differing opinions (Strandler & Harling, 2023). An example is that classroom teachers may focus on academics, and that when students have extended absences, they need to keep up with their studies to be successful. However, social workers and psychologists may be more likely to prioritize the student's mental health and emotional well-being, and be more understanding that anxiety, depression or family struggles can significantly impact attendance (Strandler & Harling, 2023). Overall, these different opinions can lead to miscommunication and unsuccessful planning to support the student. To address these challenges and create more effective strategies, it is essential to explore solutions that promote collaboration and targeted interventions to improve student attendance.

Solutions to Absenteeism

When addressing student absenteeism, it is essential to identify students at risk in the early stages to begin implementing strategies and interventions before the absences get severe. One strategy that Sprick and Berg (2019) advocate is to track attendance with a combination of unexcused absences, excused absences, and suspensions to identify patterns and intervene early. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of instructional days, which equals to 18 or more days in a traditional 180-day school year and includes all absences regardless of whether they are excused or unexcused. However, students with regular attendance are defined as missing no more than 5 percent, or fewer than 9 days per year. Educators should not wait until the end of the year to address attendance concerns. For

example, if a student missed just two days within the first 20 days of school, that already represents a 10 percent absence rate and may warrant early observation or intervention. The goal is for students to attend consistently with no more than one absence per month, in order to maintain ongoing access to instruction, school resources, and peer connections. Once patterns are identified, educators and school staff can engage in meaningful conversations with students and their families to understand barriers to attendance and collaborate on solutions (Sprick & Berg, 2019). By monitoring attendance and understanding data effectively, schools can implement targeted interventions that are responsive to the unique needs of the students and foster a more supportive and equitable approach to encouraging attendance.

Kearney and Graczyk (2020) described a multifaceted approach model for addressing school absenteeism, with three levels/tiers designed to meet the varying needs of students. Tier 1 is a universal school-wide level that focuses on preventative strategies and promotes attendance for all students. This tier includes creating a positive and inclusive school environment, fostering strong relationships between teachers and students, and ensuring engaging and accessible curriculum. Schools should monitor attendance and emphasize using positive reinforcement to encourage consistent attendance. Overall, the goal of Tier 1 is to prevent attendance issues from arising by addressing minor concerns early.

For students who begin to show signs of frequent absences, Tier 2 provides more targeted interventions compared to Tier 1. These interventions are designed to support students who are at risk of developing chronic absenteeism but do not yet have severe attendance concerns (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Interventions and supports at this level focus on individual and small-group strategies to address specific attendance barriers. Examples of Tier 2 strategies include check-ins with a trusted staff member, mentoring programs, and group counselling sessions that focus on social skills or coping strategies. Schools might pair at-risk students with mentors who help them manage attendance barriers, such as anxiety or family challenges, by providing consistent and regular check-ins and emotional support. This tier may also focus on collaborating with families to identify and understand the attendance issues. Examples of barriers for students include transportation challenges, family responsibilities, or severe anxiety about attending school. Tier 2 also focuses on early identification of students showing a pattern of absenteeism, aiming to provide support before the absenteeism becomes detrimental.

Tier 3 is the most intensive level, focusing on students with severe attendance issues. This tier involves individualized strategies to address the complex, underlying factors that contribute to absenteeism in each student (Kearney & Graczyk, 2020). Interventions at this level may involve a team of school counsellors, social workers, psychologists, and sometimes external agencies to provide additional support. Tier 3 strategies may include mental health support and services, student specific plans, and intensive case management. This stage may also include addressing issues of trauma, family instability, or serious mental health challenges. Tier 3 ensures that students with the highest level of need receive the resources and interventions necessary to re-engage with school and improve attendance.

While the Tier 3 interventions described by Kearney and Graczyk (2020) provide individualized support for students facing severe challenges, creating a positive, inclusive school environment is equally essential in preventing absenteeism by fostering a sense of belonging and engagement for all students. Creating a safe and inclusive space directly impacts school absenteeism by addressing key factors that contribute to student disengagement. Fostering positive relationships within the classroom is crucial, and teachers can build trust by showing genuine care and respect for their students by learning about their interests and listening to their perspectives (Sprick & Berg, 2019). This connection motivates students to attend school regularly and engage in their learning because they know that they are valued and supported. By combining targeted interventions for at-risk students with a school-wide commitment to inclusivity and positive relationships, educators can create a supportive environment that reduces absenteeism and encourages consistent student engagement for all.

Culturally responsive teaching practices are essential in reducing absenteeism. Many students face barriers to cultural misunderstandings that can alienate them from the classroom and school community (Cranston, 2019). Recognizing and celebrating the diverse backgrounds, languages, and experiences of students helps to create an inclusive environment wherein all students feel valued. These practices can help to remove the feelings of marginalization or exclusion that often lead to chronic absenteeism. When students see their identities reflected positively in their learning, they are more likely to feel safe and connected in the classroom, which reduces their risk of skipping school.

Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is another critical tool for addressing absenteeism by equipping students with the skills they need to overcome challenges that may prevent them from attending school. SEL helps students manage anxiety, develop resiliency, and build stronger connections with peers and teachers (Cranston, 2019). These skills are especially important for students who struggle with mental health issues or external stressors that can severely impact their attendance, such as family instability or bullying. By incorporating SEL into the curriculum, educators can create a safe and supportive environment wherein students feel empowered to face challenges and motivated to attend school consistently. Ultimately, SEL is a foundational approach to fostering emotional well-being and resilience, which will help students overcome barriers to attendance and achieve long-term academic and personal success.

In Manitoba, Canada, the provincial government created a policy to support schools. The document Safe and Caring Schools: A Policy Directive and Action Plan to Enhance Student Presence and Engagement is aimed at addressing student absenteeism and fostering an inclusive learning environment (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). Regular attendance is crucial for academic success and personal development, and this action plan provides a structured framework for schools to identify and eliminate barriers to student absences. This structured approach ensures that absenteeism is addressed directly, preventing minor attendance problems from escalating into chronic absenteeism. Implementation of the action plan involves a collaborative effort to understand the underlying causes of absenteeism in order to develop personalized support plans. This collaboration fosters a sense of shared responsibility and community involvement in promoting student attendance. By combining clear guidelines, collaborative implementation, and supportive interventions, the action plan seeks to create educational environments wherein every student can thrive. This initiative emphasizes the province's commitment to fostering student success through consistent attendance and active engagement in the learning process.

Addressing student absenteeism requires a comprehensive and proactive approach. Manitoba's *Safe and Caring Schools* policy highlights the importance of creating supportive, inclusive school environments while addressing barriers that prevent students from attending regularly (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). Strategies such as building strong relationships, offering flexible learning options, and addressing mental health and transportation challenges align with the policy's goals of fostering student well-being and academic success. By implementing these strategies, schools can reduce absenteeism and enhance student engagement, ensuring equitable access to education for all learners.

Conclusion

Addressing student absenteeism requires a comprehensive approach that understands the diverse and unique challenges students face. By understanding personal, social, family, and school-related factors, teachers and school communities can create environments that promote regular attendance and engagement. From mental health struggles like anxiety and depression to external challenges such as family responsibilities and socio-economic pressures, these barriers often intersect, worsening the problem. To address absenteeism affectively, schools must take a holistic, proactive approach that includes early identification, targeted interventions, and the involvement of all members, including teachers, caregivers, and community members.

Kearney and Graczyk's (2020) three-tier model of intervention addresses absenteeism at various levels, ensuring that all students receive the appropriate support, from universal prevention to individualized assistance for those with the most significant challenges. Strategies such as fostering positive relationships, implementing Social and Emotional Learning (SEL), and adopting culturally responsive teaching practices are essential in creating an inclusive and supportive school environment. Manitoba's *Safe and Caring Schools* policy exemplifies a comprehensive framework that promotes student engagement and attendance by addressing the root causes of absenteeism and provides strategies to support individualized plans to meet students' needs (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2023). When schools prioritize these approaches, they can foster a school community that prioritizes inclusivity, safety, and connections, which ensures that all students have the opportunity to thrive academically and personally to reach their full potential.

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From Programs to Programming: The Responsibilities of the Inclusive Leader

Adam Dyck

Abstract

In March 2024, the Winnipeg School Division announced a shift from ability-grouped programs to inclusive programming, transitioning 800 students with disabilities and emotional dysregulation into their catchment schools. This shift requires principals to lead cultural change, by integrating legislation, inclusive practices, and transformational leadership to support diverse learners. Success hinges on principals' ability to balance policy, beliefs, and collaborative instructional design, ensuring universal programming for all students. By fostering inclusive environments through intentional leadership, principals play a pivotal role in realizing systemic educational change that promotes success for students of all abilities within inclusive classrooms.

In March of 2024, the Winnipeg Free Press reported that approximately 800 students who were attending specialized, low-enrolment programs in the Winnipeg School Division (WSD) would transition to their catchment schools alongside their peers (Macintosh, 2024). The announcement that WSD Chief Superintendent, Matt Henderson, had notified parents that he preferred students with disabilities and emotional dysregulation to attend their home schools suggested a major change in the delivery of services for students attending these programs in the WSD. This announcement appears to represent a systemic change in educational philosophy and expected practices in the division, and a transition from ability-grouped, program-based education to inclusive programming for all students. Principals were tasked to guide the change from programs to programming, and thus the burden of transformational leadership falls on them. The shift, however, extends far beyond a simple change of students' physical location from low-enrolment programs to general classrooms in their catchment schools. It involves principals leading a cultural overhaul in teacher beliefs and how they program inclusively for students. As educational leaders in their schools, principals must first build a deep knowledge and understanding of legislation, disabilities, models of inclusion, and pedagogical practices that support appropriate educational programming. They must integrate this knowledge with impactful leadership practices that address barriers, and ensure success for all students. This task is inherently complex, and the successful evolution of transitioning from programs to programming depends on the leadership of the principals to guide its implementation.

Legislation and Policy in Manitoba

The influence of school principals in the inclusion of all students is complicated, and research in how programming occurs for students with diverse needs within general classrooms is limited (Sider et al., 2017, 2021). Principals are governed by policies and legislation that hold them accountable to inclusive programming for students with special needs (Pazey & Combes, 2020), and their role as educational leaders is essential in understanding and adhering to policies, which in turn defines their approach to school-based decisions (Cobb, 2014). Principals can begin the process of creating an inclusive school culture by using legislation and policies to develop an inclusive framework that clarifies a consistent model for staff to follow (Pazey & Combes, 2020). Developing a depth of knowledge and understanding of their legal responsibilities, then, is an important first step in setting a vision for their schools (Katz et al., 2018). While there are multiple areas of legislation for education in Manitoba, the primary legislative document that addresses inclusion in Manitoba is the Standards for Appropriate

Educational Programming in Manitoba. In 2022, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning updated this document, which was first introduced in 2006 as an amendment to the Appropriate Educational Programming Regulation 155/05, under the Public Schools Act (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). This amendment brought the Public Schools Act into alignment with the province's Philosophy of Inclusion, ensuring every student's right to an appropriate education. It is a framework outlining the minimal practices and services that must be provided for all students in Manitoba, and it clarifies the responsibilities for school divisions and principals of individual schools. The document guarantees that a common understanding for appropriate educational programming (AEP) is in place in all schools in the province.

While school boards are required to provide the necessary conditions for AEP for all students with respect to access and accommodation in school, principals are responsible for its implementation, as well as for the work of all divisional staff in their schools (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). AEP for students means that the provincial curriculum is the end learning goal for most students, though some students may require goals in addition to curricular learning outcomes, or individualized goals outside of the curriculum. These students are identified as having "special learning needs and abilities," and include those who are working on learning goals well beyond the grade level curriculum as well as those who require specialized services or programming due to their inability to meet curricular learning goals. Defining terms such as *special learning needs*, *disability*, and *inclusion* is an important step for principals in developing a school vision because it informs the pedagogy and practices that follow (Shyman, 2015). Principals in Manitoba can turn to legislation for clarity in defining AEP for all students regardless of ability or personal beliefs about inclusion.

Disability and Inclusion in Manitoba

When the Winnipeg Free Press reported the change in programming for students with "disabilities" in its March 2024 article (Macintosh, 2024), it did so without explaining the definition of disability. It appeared that the term disability was used as an all-encompassing term, labelling all students in WSD programs as disabled. Developing inclusive schools requires defining inclusion and implementing evidence-based practices that remove barriers to learning for all students (Ainscow, 2024). Clarifying language used to describe disability is important, because using the label "disability" implies a deficit-based condition for which a solution is possible and focuses on difference (DeMatthews et al., 2021). Definitions of inclusion that identify students based on their differences tend to be narrow and more focused on the individual, while broader definitions are more inclusive to all (Shyman, 2015). All students are supported in inclusive schools in a variety of ways, and not all students who require support have a diagnosis or disability, though some do (Cobb, 2014). Portraying inclusion in terms of ability vs. disability frames ability as being the standard to which students with a disability must achieve (Naraian et al., 2020). This approach may lead to programming decisions that attempt to help students meet ability-based norms, which risks privileging ability over disability. Doing so is discriminatory in nature, since it implies a need to address deficits rather than framing inclusion in social justice terms (Shyman, 2015). Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Education (2022b) does not refer to students in the Standards document as being disabled or having a disability; it focuses on ability-based programming through Universal Design for Learning (UDL). UDL provides a pedagogical framework through which students can achieve success, whatever their learning needs may be.

While inclusive schools are highly varied, they are typically schools that foster accessible environments wherein all students, regardless of diversity or ability, can engage in their learning as valued members of their community (Ainscow, 2020). The Standards document provides a definition of inclusion in the context of universal design (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Education, 2022b), which frames all programming and planning in the context of

access for all, regardless of ability. UDL is an instructional framework that is based on universal design (Katz et al., 2018; Rose & Meyer, 2006), and emphasizes an approach to education that not only removes physical barriers to learning but also ensures that students can access and demonstrate learning through a variety of methods, assessments, and products (Basham et al., 2020). Using a universal design approach, school divisions and principals are expected to develop a variety of strategies that support success for all students in collaboration with school, families, and community (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). UDL aligns with Manitoba's Philosophy of Inclusion and supports meeting the diverse needs of students through assessment, planning, and practice.

The UDL approach to inclusive education parallels a model proposed by Shyman (2015) that safeguards against discrimination by ensuring that programming is provided in general settings and is focused on the needs, choices, and self-determination of the individual. This model is fundamentally grounded in social justice and civil rights. It postulates that all students should receive programming, including supports and differentiated practice, in general education settings unless general settings are proven to be unsuccessful. In such cases, an alternative setting should be provided until the student can successfully return to the general classroom. Changes in environment and programming should occur only after collaboration with the individual, and are based on access to AEP rather than the school's preference for placement. The approach to inclusive education in Manitoba, as legislated in the Standards document, also mandates that programming for students is centered on the student, using a universal design lens for AEP based on individual student needs. This concept is further clarified in two other Manitoba Education documents, wherein student success is recognized to be unique for each child and is always in service of maximizing student potential to live "The Good Life" (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022a, 2024). The UDL model of inclusion for Manitoba is both legislated and has a foundation parallel to discourse in academia such as Shyman's (2015) model. In implementing a UDL approach to programming, principals must adopt a leadership style that inspires and motivates school staff to embrace change. They must do so by developing a shared vision and cultural transformation, drawing upon transformational leadership skills to shift organizational norms and attitudes (Anderson, 2017). The congruence of policy and research supports school principals in providing a transformational leadership foundation upon which they can develop this vision, based in universal design principles that will ensure success for all learners regardless of their ability.

Assessment and Planning

Along with working within a legislated framework and model of inclusion in developing a transformative vision, principals must also draw upon instructional leadership to guide assessment, planning, and school team personnel supports (Dewitt, 2017). Instructional leadership has a high impact on student outcomes through direct and indirect influences on teacher development, goal setting, programming, resource allocation, and school culture. While teachers are responsible for assessing students to inform programming in their classrooms, principals are ultimately responsible for the assessment of all students in their schools, including specialized assessments (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). Assessment provides the information required to determine how well a student is meeting programming outcomes, and the foundation for planning forward for students based on the information in the assessment (Cobb, 2014). Sometimes, even after consultation with the in-school team, differentiated instruction, and adaptations to support learning, assessments may reveal that a student is unable to meet grade-level provincial curriculum outcomes. These students may require one or more specialized services due to "cognitive/intellectual, social/emotional, behavioural, sensory, physical, communication, academic, or special healthcare needs that affect their ability to meet curricular learning outcomes" (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). The identification of students who require a

specialized assessment and subsequent specialized planning is a collaborative process, beginning with classroom-based assessments with the core team of classroom teacher, parents and student, and supported by in-school team composed of resource teachers, guidance counsellors, educational assistants and school principal (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). The school support team and division-level supports such as clinicians, consultants, elders, and knowledge keepers may become part of the student support team through a referral process led by the principal. Ensuring an active role for such supports for students is the responsibility of school principals. To do so impactfully, principals must weave their managerial, transformative, and instructional leadership skills into a cohesive collaborative practice that engages their collective expertise in service of the student (Leithwood et al., 2020). Collaborative leadership combines various forms of leadership into a practice that includes all stakeholders in inclusive education, which is particularly important in assessment and planning for student success.

Principals are responsible for leading the in-school assessment team into student-specific planning, ensuring collaboration with staff and families to address students' unique needs through appropriate interventions, accommodations, and success criteria (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022b). The written document that outlines this process is referred to as a student-specific plan (SSP) and serves as a plan, record-keeping, and communication for all stakeholders involved in the process. SSPs encourage collaboration amongst stakeholders and provide a means for teachers and school leaders to assess the impact of programming and supports, to adjust as necessary, and to support when transitioning students between grades (Timothy & Agbenyega, 2018). SSPs are critical in supporting teachers in developing confidence to program successfully for all students, regardless of their ability. Principals have the legislated responsibility for leading assessment and planning, and their collaborative leadership skills are instrumental for successful inclusive programming.

Conclusion

The shift from inclusive programs to inclusive programming in the WSD represents a significant change in both educational philosophy and practice. It extends beyond a change of programming for students with special learning needs and applies to all students. As educational leaders, principals must balance the complexities of policy, legislation, beliefs, and diverse student needs. This responsibility requires principals not only to have a deep understanding of inclusive education practices, but also to engage in instructional and transformational leadership that supports teachers, students, and families in providing programming that ensure success for all learners. By ensuring proper assessments and leading collaborative, universal design planning for AEP, principals can lead schools towards creating environments wherein all students, regardless of their abilities, can be successful. The success of the broader vision of systemic change in the WSD ultimately depends on the principals' ability to lead the complex integration of legislation, beliefs, assessment and planning into a model whereby all school staff can successfully program for students of all abilities within an inclusive classroom. Through their intentional administrative, transformative, instructional, and collaborative leadership, inclusive leaders can make the systemic educational shift from programs to programming possible.

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About the Author

Adam Dyck, principal of a dual-track French Immersion elementary school, is passionate about leadership, inclusive education, and fostering success for all learners. Pursuing an M.Ed. in educational administration, he balances school leadership with family life. His work reflects a commitment to creating equitable environments where every student thrives.

The Resilience Factor: Rethinking Risk in Children's Play

Deanne Kuehn

Abstract

Risky play helps children build resilience, develop prosocial skills, and support lifelong physical, mental, and emotional well-being. However, societal overemphasis on safety often limits schools' willingness to embrace risky play. Educators' beliefs about risk, lack of training, and restrictive school policies further reduce opportunities for healthy risk-taking and unstructured problem-solving. By rethinking safety and adopting a balanced approach, schools can create meaningful play opportunities that enhance children's social, emotional, and cognitive development, fostering well-rounded growth.

Risky play – thrilling acts that push boundaries and carry a possibility of injury – is vital for raising happy, healthy children who are equipped to face life's challenges and thrive in an unpredictable world. However, societal expectations often restrict these opportunities, requiring educators to reevaluate safety protocol and embrace practices that nurture healthy risk-taking. Schools need a balanced safety approach that includes manageable risks and opportunities in order to help children build problem-solving skills and confidence for adulthood. Caregivers must reflect on their own risk tolerance and establish an understanding of foundational concepts, to facilitate experiences that allow children to explore their capabilities. Schools have a crucial role in creating a culture that encourages purposeful, developmentally rich play. Rethinking safety and adopting a balanced approach to risk in play can promote children's growth, highlighting the importance of shifting adult perceptions, identifying opportunities for meaningful risk, and implementing school-wide strategies that support healthy play.

Risky play is essential for children's health and development. It reduces stress, boosts creativity, and strengthens mental wellness, resilience, and overall well-being (Harper & Obee, 2021). Risky play also helps children to nurture important skills such as decision-making, perseverance, self-awareness, and independence (Cevher-Kalburan, 2015). Without it, children may avoid challenges, become more sedentary, and face increased vulnerability to obesity, chronic disease, and mental illness (Harper & Obee, 2021; Obee et al., 2021). Risky play contributes to a solid foundation for lifelong health and growth.

Several problems interfere with children engaging in risky unstructured play. There is an over-emphasis on safety in children's playspaces, activities, and interactions. Adults hold risk-averse perspectives that limit children from having positive experiences with risk. Caregivers lack a foundational understanding of play, risk, and challenge, and are inexperienced with identifying opportunities for risk in play elements and spaces. School policies and playground rules restrict risky free play at school. A multifaceted approach to foster risk and free play in schools addresses misconceptions of safety, encourages adults to rethink their perceptions on risk, establishes an understanding of opportunities for risk, and calls for school-wide shifts.

Misconceptions of Safety

A balanced approach to safety should include manageable risks and opportunities for independent exploration, in order to prepare children for the challenges they will face in adulthood. Playgrounds today are designed to minimize injury, but in doing so, they fail to engage children in active play, hindering their physical and social development. While adults often believe that organized activities offer the safest play opportunities, research shows that unstructured play results in fewer injuries while supporting critical social and emotional growth. The increasing focus on emotional safety has led to missed opportunities for children to practice resilience and other crucial life skills. By providing opportunities for developmentally appropriate

risk on playgrounds, shifting from supervision and structure to independent unstructured play, and supporting children through emotional discomforts, we can help them build the necessary tools to become successful adults.

Today's playgrounds are designed to be so safe that children are losing interest, interfering with their development. Society's belief that eliminating all risky elements prevents injuries has led to playgrounds that lack challenges for children's healthy growth (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). These overly safe designs often leave children bored, pushing them to seek unhealthy alternatives, such as excessive screentime or substance use (Brunelle et al., 2016). Instead, a "balanced approach" should focus safety efforts on minimizing life-threatening hazards while creating playspaces that encourage creativity, exploration, and problem-solving (Brunelle et al., 2016; Gill et al., 2019). A comprehensive guide, created by The Consortium for Health, Intervention, Learning and Development (CHILD), supports design choices that encourage meaningful and beneficial play (Herrington et al., n.d.). (See Appendix A.) By designing playgrounds that consider a range of ages, abilities, and interest levels, we can reignite children's imagination and promote healthy development.

Adults often equate supervised activities with safety, but free play yields better outcomes for children's social-emotional development. The life skills gained through unstructured play far outweigh the minimal danger of injury. Unstructured experiences allow children to explore their limits, building resilience and personal character (Brunelle et al., 2016). Independent play fosters decision-making and conflict resolution skills, and results in fewer injuries than organized sports (Haidt, 2024). Typical injuries from risky play – scrapes, bruises, and strains – are minor and rarely have a lasting impact (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024). To support healthy growth and well-being, adults should provide developmentally appropriate opportunities that encourage risk-taking and decision-making through independent play.

The notion of feeling safe often leads to missed opportunities for personal growth. Traditionally, safety referred only to physical protection, but this concept has expanded to include "emotional safety" in recent years (Haidt, 2024, p. 88). The following is a common playground scenario: A group of children is playing soccer, and Anna, new to the game, joins in, but is ridiculed for a missed play. Feeling embarrassed, she seeks out a supervisor, who intervenes by reminding the children, "Remember, everyone is allowed to play – no teasing!" While Anna's feelings were hurt, she was not in physical danger. This was a missed opportunity for children to practise empathy and conflict resolution. The supervisor should have encouraged Anna to confront her peers and talk out their frustrations to resolve the issue. When we insulate children from discomfort, we prevent them from learning how to manage their emotions and resolve conflicts independently (Obee et al., 2021). Adults need to guide children through difficult emotions in order to support perseverance and strengthen emotional regulation skills.

Our current approach to safety – over-supervision through structured activities and eliminating risk and discomfort under the guise of protection – is leaving children unprepared for adulthood. Safety measures on playgrounds should focus on preventing severe injuries while still allowing meaningful challenges that promote dynamic development. Outdoor free play results in fewer injuries compared to organized sports and offers greater opportunities for social emotional skill building. The concept of safety should focus on physical protection while making space for children to navigate discomfort and resolve emotional challenges. Environments that encourage calculated risk-taking and choice-making will better equip children with the necessary skills to become competent adults.

Shifting Perceptions to Support Risk

With a tendency towards risk-aversion, caregivers must rethink their approach to risk and play in order to facilitate meaningful experiences for children. Allowing children to follow their instincts creates confidence to engage with risk. Educating school staff contributes to a positive shift in adult risk perceptions. Implementing vigilant supervision strategies further enhances

children's opportunities to engage with risk in play. Reframing adult perceptions of risky play is key to creating meaningful, developmentally beneficial experiences for children.

Supporting children's natural instincts for assessing risk, rather than projecting adult cautions, fosters confidence and skill in play. While caregivers often intend to protect with reminders such as "be careful ... slow down ... not too high," these warnings do not help children build risk management skills (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024). Using phrases such as "do you see ... notice how ... what [is] your plan" capitalize on teachable moments by inviting children to think critically (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024). Children will inherently avoid risks that seem beyond their limits (Goeres, 2020). By offering selective and meaningful guidance, we demonstrate confidence in their abilities and promote skillful risk-taking.

Education and training have a positive influence on educators' perspectives of risk. Post-secondary coursework will help to establish a balanced position in pre-service teachers, contributing to a deeper understanding of risky play, and shifting perspectives from "avoiding" to "supporting" risk (Cevher-Kalburan, 2015, pp. 242, 254). In-service teachers will benefit from professional development tools such as Appetite to Play's (n.d.) online workshop, which guides participants to reflect on their beliefs and feelings about risky play, understand its benefits, and clarify their role as facilitators. Appendix A provides a collection of resources for educators to learn about risky play and how to weave it into their practice. Educators must cultivate trusting relationships with families by maintaining transparency and sharing insights that help caregivers to embrace the value of risky play in schools. Teachers, educational assistants, and educational paraprofessionals benefit from training in children's play and risk, helping them to adopt positive attitudes and practical strategies for facilitating healthy exploratory risk.

Supervision approaches should minimize unnecessary interventions in order to enhance children's engagement with risk in play. One approach, "vigilant care," respects children's autonomy while ensuring safety whereby, like a lifeguard, caregivers intervene only when there is a legitimate concern of harm (Grove, 2019, "Vigilant Care" section, para. 1). (See Appendix A.) To reduce the habit of intervening prematurely, caregivers can use the "17-second rule" – pausing to count to 17 while observing the children before intervening (Scandiffio, 2024, "How Do We Stop" section, paras. 6-7). Taking this moment to assess the situation often reveals that intervention is unnecessary. By adopting a responsive and mindful supervision style, caregivers enable children to explore risky play confidently, with the right supports for healthy growth.

Shifting adult perceptions of risky play – from cautious intervention to supportive observation – empowers children to explore their capabilities and build independence. Adults must honour and trust children's natural intuition for assessing risk in play. By incorporating training on risk and play into education, educators will be better equipped to facilitate meaningful play experiences. When staff adjust their approach to supervision and embrace strategies such as vigilant care, they create a nurturing environment where children gain resilience, confidence, and problem-solving skills. Gaining a tolerance for risk fosters a culture wherein children can thrive, learning from their experiences and growing into capable, self-assured individuals.

Understanding Opportunities for Risk

For children to benefit fully from the developmental advantages of play, the adults in their lives – parents, school staff, and coaches – must establish a profound understanding of its foundational concepts. Play, risk, and challenge work together to support children as they explore their world. Risky play categories help to identify the types of risk possible in activities. Viewing risk through the lens of affordance, along with individual and environmental characteristics, enables one to capitalize on risk-taking opportunities. By forming a core understanding of play and key concepts, adults can effectively actualize the potential developmental benefits of risk.

Within child development, the intertwined concepts of play, risk, and challenge offer pathways for children to explore their world and build resilience. Play liberates children from

structured rules or goals, enabling learning to emerge organically (Herrington et al., n.d.). Free play inherently involves an element of risk, specific to the child's developmental stage, skill level and social maturity (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024). Risky play acknowledges appropriate safety measures and respects children's capabilities, encouraging them to experience excitement, thrill, and challenge as they push their mental and physical boundaries. Risk in play nurtures confidence and an ability to navigate challenges, laying the foundation for lifelong learning and adaptability.

Categorizing activities by the type of risk involved helps caregivers to realize the potential of a playspace. There are eight categories of risky play: playing at heights, such as climbing and jumping; playing at speed, such as running and sliding; play involving tools, such as supervision using an axe, hammer or ropes; play involving dangerous elements, such as fire or water; rough-and-tumble play, such as play fighting or fencing with sticks; play with risk of disappearing or getting lost, such as exploring neighbourhoods or woods with little to no supervision; play involving impact, such as crashing into something and using force; and vicarious play, meaning to experience thrill through others' risky play (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024). Understanding these categories teaches adults to identify opportunities for risk to enrich children's play experience.

Potential risk-taking opportunities emerge when play elements are viewed by the types of risk they afford, along with individual and environmental characteristics. For example, trees serve as climbable and jump-down-off-able structures; ice offers a flat and smooth surface for skating or sliding; sticks are graspable objects that can be used to strike or fence; wooded areas provide enclosure where children can hide (Obee et al., 2021). The influence of individual characteristics – how each child approaches potential risk in play environments – is demonstrated in this example: two young children might use wood stumps and a wood plank to set up a walking plank to balance across, whereas an older child might remove the plank and jump from stump to stump (Cevher-Kalburan, 2015; Obee et al., 2021). Activities and play elements are also defined by environmental characteristics: stable, moveable, and weather (Obee et al., 2021). For example, tobogganing features all three characteristics: the hill is stable, the sled is moveable, and the snow is a weather feature. Viewing play environments through the lens of risk affordances reveals more opportunities for risky play to be actualized.

Understanding and embracing the multifaceted nature of risky play can unlock key opportunities for children's growth and development. By recognizing how play, risk, and challenge are intertwined, caregivers can create environments that nurture children's exploration and resiliency. When aware of the types of risks in play, and how play elements and individual and environmental characteristics afford risk, adults can better guide children through navigating challenges while facilitating confidence and adaptability. By realizing the opportunities of risky play, we can ensure that children are equipped for a lifetime of learning and personal growth.

School-Wide Shifts

School culture, shaped by staff and policies, plays a pivotal role in facilitating healthy play opportunities for students. To achieve this, school administration and teachers must prioritize unstructured play by integrating it into policies and daily practices. A formal play statement, coupled with clear playground rules, can articulate a school's commitment to play and guide stakeholders in supporting this vision. Tools such as risk-benefit analysis address parental concerns and liability, ensuring that risky play is implemented thoughtfully. When recess is enriched with materials that promote exploration and creativity, it becomes a dynamic and valuable learning experience. Extra-curricular play clubs, driven by student interests, can help to reduce absenteeism and address behavioural challenges by fostering engagement and collaboration. These actionable strategies are designed to enhance unstructured play, making it a central and impactful element of every student's educational experience.

School administrators and staff can reinforce the importance of unstructured time and play through their school policies. Recess, as an essential learning support, should be scheduled proportionately alongside academic subjects (Mercado, 2022b). It is recommended to allot 15 minutes of unstructured play per hour for young children (Mercado, 2022a). Recess should continue being scheduled throughout middle years, because it promotes "cognitive processing and academic performance" (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Policies must ensure that recess is not taken away as punishment for poor behaviour, or to complete unfinished work (National Association for Sport and Physical Education, n.d.). Limiting homework provides more time for free play and family after school (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). Establishing unstructured play as a priority within school policies fosters a culture with equitable play opportunities for all students.

A school's play culture is solidified through a formal play statement and clear, meaningful playground rules. A play statement recognizes the value of play, outlines benefits for students, and reflects the school's commitment to providing regular play opportunities during the school day (Casey & Robertson, 2019). Guiding questions help to craft this statement by prompting staff to reflect on their goals for students, their philosophy on risky play, and their role in nurturing a supportive play environment (Keeler, 2020). Engaging stakeholders – including parents, students, and community members – in the drafting process ensures that the play statement aligns with shared values and priorities. Simple yet powerful playground rules, such as "respect others, respect yourself, [and] respect the environment" are easy for children to understand and promote harmonious play experiences (Keeler, 2020). Together, a well-defined play statement and clear playground rules provide unified guidelines that communicate the school's commitment to play to staff, students, and families.

Implementing risky play in schools requires a thoughtful balance between managing hazards, ensuring physical safety, and addressing parental and liability concerns. Educators can navigate risky situations with confidence by assessing the environment and understanding the abilities of participating children (Casey & Robertson, 2019; Cevher-Kalburan, 2015). A comprehensive risk-benefit analysis establishes a structured framework for evaluating whether benefits of an activity outweigh its risks, using an "exhaustive list" of potential risks, benefits, and mitigation strategies (Keeler, 2020, p. 45). (See Appendix B for a detailed example of this tool.) This process ensures that risky activities are thoughtfully planned, with practical precautions in place to reduce hazards. During play, educators dynamically apply this analysis through vigilant care, intervening only when a legitimate concern arises (Grove, 2019). By adopting risk-benefit analysis, schools create meaningful play opportunities while demonstrating a commitment to liability concerns and maintaining trust with families through proper due diligence.

The opportunity for recess to offer rich learning relies on children having appropriate clothing for all weather and being equipped with materials that encourage creative exploration. Manitoba's harsh winters require schools to be well-prepared for outdoor and indoor play. Staff should model appropriate layering for outdoor activities and encourage students to come dressed for the weather (McLean & Larivière, n.d.). To facilitate problem solving and collaboration, elementary schools should replace play balls and structured activities with loose parts and raw materials (Casey & Robertson, 2019; Mercado, 2022b). Loose materials such as sticks, stones, wood pallets, and tires can be used freely and creatively while fostering learning through inclusive play-based exploration (Beaulieu & Beno, 2024; Children's Scrapstore, 2009). When extreme conditions keep students indoors, dynamic play materials such as loose parts, dress up, and Lego promote rich learning opportunities, compared to structured activities such as cards or ball games (LIINK Project, n.d.). When recess is powered with adaptive materials and a culture of unstructured imaginative play, children are empowered to explore and create, building essential life skills through every season.

Extra-curricular play clubs can effectively address absenteeism and problem behaviours by fostering conflict management skills through student-driven activities. Held before or after school, these clubs offer an "outlet" for energy and a space for self-regulation as students create

their own games and activities while taking responsibility for resolving disagreements (Let Grow, n.d.a, p. 1). Supervisors act as “lifeguards,” intervening only when necessary and guiding students to use tools such as the “conflict corner” – a structured process where they face each other with palms up, express their concerns, propose solutions, and conclude with a handshake and a compliment (Let Grow, n.d.a, p. 1; The PE Specialist, 2022, 1:45). (See Appendix A.) These “productive disagreements” teach children to manage criticism and build resilience (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018, p. 240). The impact is notable: one school reported a 64% decrease in bus incidents and a 51% decrease in physical acts and student defiance within its first year (Let Grow, n.d.b, “Teaches Real-World" section, graph). By promoting student-led activities and real-life opportunities for conflict resolution, play clubs help to improve behaviour and attendance while supporting children’s social and emotional growth.

Unstructured play, when embedded into school policies and daily routines, becomes a powerful driver of purposeful learning, facilitated by the collective effort of staff and administrators. School policies shape routines and curriculum while setting the tone for a culture that values play as a vital part of education. A formal play statement, paired with clear playground rules, reflects the school’s commitment to fostering meaningful play and offers stakeholders clear guidance for supporting this vision. Tools such as risk-benefit analysis ensure that risky play is implemented thoughtfully, addressing parental concerns and liability while emphasizing safety and developmental benefits. Recess, as a significant learning opportunity, should be enriched with materials that inspire exploration and creativity. Additionally, before- or after-school play clubs can be instrumental in addressing truancy and behavioural challenges. Unstructured risky play is an essential component of a well-rounded education, most effectively integrated when fully embraced by the school, its people, and the principles that move them.

Let Them Play

Conversations with a seven-year-old expert in play exemplify both the challenges and opportunities of risky play. The potential for injury is a concern for educators, and students are attuned to this: “Sticks are not allowed at school because teachers think they are dangerous . . . they do [not] want anyone getting poked in the eye” (A. Kuehn, personal communication, November 21, 2024). Despite this, the potential for imagination remains unbounded: “If I could play with sticks at recess, I would make a pretend fire, or maybe use sticks and leaves to build a little house . . . I could play swords . . . it could be a witch’s broom, or a magic wand. I can pretend!” These words remind us of the creativity and resourcefulness that children naturally possess. Risky play sparks creativity and autonomy when adults step back, support children’s natural play process, and cultivate these important qualities.

Educators often hesitate to embrace risky play in schools due to parental concerns, liability issues, and societal tendencies to prioritize safety above all else. School policies frequently limit unstructured play in favour of academics and structured activities. With a balanced understanding of safety, risk, and play, educators can create developmentally appropriate play environments, implement new supervision strategies for unstructured time, and enact institutional changes to foster opportunities for healthy risk-taking that enhance social, emotional, and cognitive development in children.

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About the Author

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Appendix A
Educator Resources

Implementation Supports

Canadian Public Health Association. (n.d.). *Decision making tools*. https://bit.ly/3CF4LuV
Six tools to support policy development and procedures for schools and divisions implementing loose parts and unstructured play in school.

Casey, T., & Robertson, J. (2019). *Loose parts play: A toolkit* (2nd ed.). Inspiring Scotland. https://bit.ly/40VZ6e4
A comprehensive guide to implementing loose parts play in a childcare setting, including a "getting started" section, advice for facilitators, and guidance for policies and documentation. The information is designed for teachers seeking to incorporate loose parts into their practice, and for schools and divisions aiming to shift their play philosophy.

Children's Scrapstore. (2009, June 29). *Scrapstore playpods in action* [Video]. YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nqi1KyJJeKg
This inspiring video highlights the true potential of loose parts. Share this video with colleagues, families, school division leaders, and anyone else who is willing to watch it.

Gill, T., Power, M., & Brussoni, M. (2019). *Risk-benefit assessment for outdoor play: A Canadian toolkit.* Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. https://indd.adobe.com/view/44ed054b-917b-4e02-a1e3-e6c4cbfe0360
This Canadian-authored guide focuses on policy, liability, and documentation, as well as outdoor play in Canada, and risk in play. Template forms provided include informed consent, a standard of care checklist, risk-benefit analysis form, and incident report.

Herrington, S., Lesmeister, C., Nicholls, J., & Stefiuk, K. (n.d.). *Seven Cs: An informational guide to young children's outdoor play spaces.* Consortium for Health, Intervention, Learning and Development (CHILD). https://bit.ly/4fSbKz0
An informational guide for designing outdoor playspaces that support children's developmental needs by incorporating the unique elements of nature.

Let Grow. (n.d.). *Let grow play club*. https://letgrow.org/program/play-club/
Background information about the recommended school play club, including its benefits, testimonials, and a request form for the free school implementation guide.

LIINK Project. (n.d.). *Parents unstructured play guide.* https://bit.ly/3Z37WEb
A one-page list on suggested loose materials for indoor and outdoor play.

McLean, J., & Larivière, C. (with Clarke, H., Child and Nature Alliance Core Team, & Doyle, N.). (n.d.). *A teacher's guidebook for bringing learning outside.* Child and Nature Alliance of Canada. https://bit.ly/4f0j373
Curricular connections with outdoor activities for early and middle years, as well as support information for risky play in schools, dressing for all seasons, and dialogue examples for facilitators supervising risky play.

Outside Play. (n.d.). *Bring your class outside! An outside play tool for teachers*. https://www.outsideplay.org/tool-microsites/teacher-tool
Another Canadian resource geared to elementary teachers covers introductory information on outdoor play and how to bring learning outside, with special connections for numeracy, literacy,

and science. Tools on assessment for and of learning with loose parts and outdoor learning are included.

School Printables

Canadian Public Health Association. (n.d.) *Infographics*. https://bit.ly/3VarMMD
This site provides four posters on unstructured play, including benefits to mental health, perceptions versus facts, and the value of school recess. Resources could be posted in staff rooms, supplemented in staff onboarding packages, and shared with families.

Grove, J. (2019, September 18). *Be a lifeguard to your child's "risky" play.* Active for Life. https://activeforlife.com/lifeguard-in-risky-play/
This article includes a downloadable poster on how to be a "lifeguard parent," explaining how to supervise children's play without interfering in the natural play process.

South Shore Active Communities. (2020). *Adults in outdoor play*. https://bit.ly/411Pr5D
This infographic can be posted in the staff room to illustrate the adult's role in outdoor play, including what the adult should offer children in play, the "lifeguard" approach to supervision, how to dynamically assess risk and benefits, and the difference between risk and hazard.

The PE Specialist. (2022). *The conflict corner – A teacher solution for conflict resolution*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TM0nmowC5I&t=2s
Use this poster in your classroom or gymnasium to guide students through student-led conflict resolution.

Online Workshops

Appetite to Play. (n.d.). *Outside and risky play online workshop*. https://bit.ly/3ZjVuBn

Keeler, R. (n.d.). *Online courses*. https://rustykeeler.com/online-courses-test-demestration/

Appendix B
Example of Risk-Benefit Analysis for Climbing Trees

Benefits	**Risks**
• Work on balance • Learn limits of heights • Build physical strength • Motor skill development • Feel textures of wood • Thrilling and exciting	• Can fall (breaks and sprains) • Get scraped or poked • Clothing could get caught on branch
Management • Adult assesses tree safety before child climbs • Check for loose or weak limbs • Ensure safe landing space around tree • Ensure child is wearing appropriate footwear and clothing • Establish climbing rules (one at a time) • Make a plan w/ climber (trust instincts, no jumping, stay focused)	

Supporting Children with Early Onset Schizophrenia in Schools

Fritzgerald Villanueva

Abstract

Early onset schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder with observed characteristics that vary among children and chronic symptoms that require antipsychotic medications. As a result, supporting children with the disorder in schools is a challenging responsibility. Corresponding to the three-tiered model of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), the practical approaches of organizing an inclusive classroom, facilitating a peer support group, and designing individualized social skills interventions help to respond to these challenges. Consequently, educators have the means to support children with the disorder in schools because of these practical approaches.

Early onset schizophrenia is a rare form of psychotic disorder, characterized by symptoms of psychosis and other key characteristics, including comorbid conditions, such as suicidal thoughts or social withdrawals (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). These key characteristics and comorbid conditions affect the academic performance and social well-being of children with the disorder in schools because of the severity of these symptoms (Arango et al., 2022), inconsistencies in observed characteristics of the disorder among children (Hastings et al., 2020; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018), and limited efficacy of antipsychotic medications for managing these symptoms (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020). Responding to these challenges is consistent with the understanding of inclusive schools in the province that expects educators to provide learning supports for all students, to inspire a sense of belonginess in school communities, and to encourage collaborative learning from all students (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022). Therefore, supporting children with the disorder in schools represents a commitment to inclusion because of these expectations.

Organizing an inclusive classroom, facilitating a peer support group, and designing individualized social skills interventions help to respond to these challenges. These approaches correspond to the three-tiered model of Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) respectively (Lee, 2023; Nitz et al., 2023): the first tier consists of universally designed supports that utilize multiple means of instructional delivery, assessment strategies and tools, and assigned work (Lapinski et al., 2012); the second tier includes strategic supports for learning needs, such as gaps in curricular competencies or difficulties in regulating behaviours, which require either individualized interventions or a support group (Lee, 2023); and the third tier involves intensive supports for learning deficits, particularly developmental delays and functional impairments that necessitate individualized interventions (Nitz et al., 2023). The practicality of these approaches, on the other hand, relies on accomplishing necessary priorities through teamwork among parents/legal guardians, educators, and the school-based supports team (SBRT) to provide the benefits that each approach offers to children with the disorder. Consequently, educators have the means to support children with the disorder in schools because of these practical approaches that correspond to the three-tiered model of MTSS.

Challenges Related to the Disorder

Supporting children with early onset schizophrenia in schools is a challenging responsibility (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). First, the key characteristics of the disorder are chronic and incurable (Arango et al., 2022). Second, the inconsistencies in observed characteristics of the disorder among children often cause misdiagnosis and ambiguities between the disorder and its comorbidities (Fernandez et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020). Third, the use of antipsychotic medications for managing symptoms of the disorder offers only temporary relief (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020). Consistent with the understanding of inclusive schools (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022), educators are responsible for providing constant care and supervision in schools (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018), addressing stereotypes and discriminations that stem from gaps in the understanding of the disorder (Ferrie et al., 2020; Mannarini et al., 2022), and designing individualized social skills intervention that help to overcome deficits in social and executive functioning (Harvey et al, 2019; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Consequently, supporting children with the disorder in schools represents a commitment to inclusion because of these expected responsibilities.

Chronic and Incurable Symptoms

Early onset schizophrenia is a severe mental disorder that has no known cure (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). The key characteristics of the disorder include symptoms of psychosis (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), incoherent thought processing (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020), and developmental delays in cognitive and social functioning (Harvey et al., 2019; Mannarini et al., 2022). These key characteristics are not only incurable, but chronic (Arango et al., 2022), affecting the quality of life of children with the disorder (Fernandez et al., 2019). Furthermore, some comorbid conditions, particularly suicidal thoughts and social withdrawal aggravate the severity of these key characteristics (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Mannarini et al., 2022). As a result, children with the disorder require constant care and supervision because of these severe symptoms (Harvey et al., 2019).

Consistent with the expectation of providing learning support for all students (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022), educators are responsible for providing constant care and supervision in schools (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Some in-class learning supports, such as reduced class work or supervised intermittent breaks (Brown, 2022; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018), accommodate the learning needs for constant care and supervision (Harvey et al., 2019), keeping children with the disorder safe and grounded on days when they feel overwhelmed from symptoms of the disorder. Furthermore, some accessibility to learning practice in schools, particularly working closely with educators, such as quick tutorials alongside classmates or small-group instruction, encourages class participation (Lapinski et al., 2012), improving the academic performance of children with the disorder. Therefore, providing constant care and supervision keeps children with the disorder safe and grounded on days when they feel overwhelmed and improves their academic performance in schools.

Inconsistencies in Observed Characteristics

The manifestations of early onset schizophrenia vary among children in clinical observations (Hastings et al., 2020; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). These inconsistencies in observed characteristics of the disorder often cause misdiagnosis and ambiguities between the disorder and its comorbidities (Fernandez et al., 2019; Hastings et al., 2020). Nonetheless, official diagnosis requires medical and health evaluations by pediatricians, minimizing cases of misdiagnosis (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020). Despite the reliability of diagnosis by pediatricians, on the other hand, the knowledge of the disorder remains incomplete in the literature (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018; Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020). As a result, medical practitioners and the public (including parents and educators) often misunderstand the disorder because of these inconsistencies in observed characteristics of the disorder among children (Mannarini et al., 2022), which often cause misdiagnosis and ambiguities, despite the reliability of diagnosis by pedestrians.

Consistent with the expectation of inspiring a sense of belonginess in school communities (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022), educators are responsible for addressing stereotypes and discriminations that stem from gaps in the understanding of the disorder (Ferrie et al., 2020; Mannarini et al., 2022). Some stereotypes, such as violent tendencies towards others or inability to discern reality (Mannarini et al., 2022), often cause emotional harm and depression (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Furthermore, children with the disorder are prone to discriminations because of public stigmas that stem from negative portrayals of individuals with schizophrenia spectrum and other psychotic disorder in the media (Fernandez et al., 2019; Mannarini et al., 2022). These stereotypes and discriminations affect the social well-being of children with the disorder in schools (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Therefore, addressing stereotypes and discriminations that stem from gaps in the understanding of the disorder improves the social well-being of children with the disorder, inspiring their sense of belonginess in school communities.

Temporary Relief from Antipsychotic Medications

Although psychotherapies offer promising results, parental care is the most reliable form of intervention for children with early onset schizophrenia (Jameel et al., 2020). The use of antipsychotic medications, on the other hand, is the only form of treatment for managing symptoms of the disorder (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018; Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020). Unfortunately, this pharmacological approach only offers temporary relief (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020). As a result, children with the disorder often develop deficits in social and executive functioning (Harvey et al, 2019), despite the reliability of parental care for intervention and the use antipsychotic medications for managing symptoms of the disorder.

Consistent with the expectation of encouraging collaborative learning from all students (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022), educators are responsible for designing social skills interventions that help to overcome deficits in social and executive functioning (Harvey et al, 2019; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Some social deficits, such as lack of confidence in making friends or socializing in schools, often cause low self-esteem and social isolation (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020), discouraging children with the disorder from interacting and working with peers.

Furthermore, some executive functioning deficits, particularly the inability to perform routine tasks (Mannarini et al., 2022), such as taking medications regularly and on time or regulating emotions (Harvey et al, 2019), often cause anxieties over attending schools and participating in group activities (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018; Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020), affecting the school experience of children with the disorder. Therefore, designing social skills interventions that help to overcome deficits in social and executive functioning builds confidence in interacting and working with peers and improves school experience, encouraging collaborative learning from children with the disorder in schools.

Practical Approaches

The approaches to these challenges improve the academic performance and social well-being of children with the disorder. First, organizing an inclusive classroom provides in-class learning supports by means of creating a safe and welcoming space that accommodates unique learning needs of all students (Brown, 2022; Lapinski et al., 2012). Second, facilitating a peer support group inspires a sense of belonginess in school communities by means of encouraging meaningful dialogues among peers and raising awareness on issues related to mental health and wellness (Butler et al., 2022; Villanueva, 2021). Third, designing individualized social skills interventions encourages collaborative learning by means of helping to acquire social and executive functioning skills in peer interactions (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018; Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020), managing stressors (Brown 2022), and independent living (Cegarra et al., 2023, Harvey et al., 2019; Samuel et al., 2018). These approaches correspond to the three-tiered model of MTSS respectively (Lee, 2023; Nitz et al., 2023); whereas the practicality of these approaches relies on teamwork to arrange a balanced schedule between in-class learning supports and individualized interventions, to ensure consistent participations in the peer support group, and to reinforce the acquired social skills outside of schools. Accomplishing these priorities is necessary to provide the benefits of thriving in the classroom alongside peers, building confidence in socializing with peers, and preparing for independence in adulthood. Consequently, educators have the means to support children with the disorder, and hence to improve their academic performance and social well-being in schools, because of these practical approaches that correspond to the three-tiered model of MTSS.

Inclusive Classroom

Organizing an inclusive classroom is an opportunity to create a safe and welcoming space that accommodates unique learning needs of all students (Brown, 2022; Lapinski et al., 2012). This first-tier approach also encourages educators to explore the framework of Universal Design for Learning (Brown, 2022; Lee, 2023), which provides rationale and procedures for organizing an inclusive classroom (Lapinski et al., 2012 Nitz et al., 2023). Furthermore, exploring UDL helps to acquire content knowledge of accessibility to learning practices (Lapinski et al., 2012), such as utilizing adapted lessons to accommodate diverse learners or re-arranging desks to encourage collaborative learning (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018; Lapinski et al., 2012), including working closely with educators to provide constant care and supervision for children with the disorder in schools (Harvey et al, 2019). As a result, organizing an inclusive

classroom provides in-class learning supports by means of creating a safe and welcoming space that accommodates unique learning needs of all students.

The practicality of this first-tier approach relies on arranging a balanced schedule between in-class learning supports and individualized interventions. The reason is because of the necessity of administering individualized interventions away from peers (Brown, 2022; Lee, 2023), which disrupts class participations of children with the disorder. Accomplishing this priority requires involvement of parents/legal guardians and the SBRT to make informed decisions based on relevant information (Lee, 2023), such as intensity of symptoms of the disorder throughout the day or ability to stay on-task over a class period (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Furthermore, arranging a balanced schedule through teamwork imposes accountability on educators (Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, 2022), discouraging some improper uses of individualized interventions in schools, particularly for time-outs and other reactive strategies related to managing misbehaviours (Brown 2022), and hence allowing children with the disorder to thrive in the classroom alongside peers. Therefore, arranging a balanced schedule between in-class learning supports and individualized interventions provides the benefit of thriving in the classroom alongside peers.

Peer Support Group

Facilitating a peer support group is an opportunity to encourage meaningful dialogues among peers on issues related to mental health and wellness (Villanueva, 2021). This second-tier approach also offers educators a platform for raising awareness on issues that affect the social well-being of children with the disorder in schools, particularly the stereotypes and discriminations that stem from gaps in the understanding of the disorder (Ferrie et al., 2020). Encouraging meaningful dialogues among peers and raising awareness on issues related to mental health and wellness help to instill sympathy and respect for peers and build resiliency in students (Butler et al., 2022; Villanueva, 2021), inspiring a sense of belonginess in school communities. As a result, facilitating a peer support group inspires a sense of belongingness in school communities by means of encouraging meaningful dialogues among peers and raising awareness on issues related to mental health and wellness.

The practicality of this second-tier approach relies on ensuring consistent participations in the peer support group. The reason is because of the capacity of the peer support group for connecting and building relationships among peers (Butler et al., 2022). Accomplishing this priority requires support of parents/legal guardians to encourage consistent participations and effort of educators to communicate the rationale of the peer support group. Particularly, the rationale is to advocate for social well-being of students by encouraging meaningful dialogues among peers and raising awareness on issues related to mental health and wellness (Butler et al., 2022; Villanueva, 2021). With this rationale in mind, consistent participations in the peer support group build confidence in socializing with peers, which often results in personal growth, such as making new friends or acquiring public speaking skills (Villanueva, 2021). Therefore, ensuring consistent participations in the peer support group provides the benefit of building confidence in socializing with peers.

Individualized Social Skills Interventions

Designing individualized social skills interventions is an opportunity to explore a variety of strategies and tools for acquiring social functioning skills in peer interactions that build confidence in interacting and working with peers (Petlovanyi & Tsarkov, 2020), such as initiating proper conversations or understanding social cues (Harvey et al., 2019). This third-tier approach also encourages educators to design coping strategies and tools for managing stressors (Brown, 2022), particularly in expressing emotions with words and asking to take a break that keep children with the disorder safe and grounded on days when they feel overwhelmed (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Furthermore, educators have an opportunity to design intervention for acquiring executive functioning skills in independent living that improve school experience (Cegarra et al., 2023, Harvey et al., 2019; Samuel et al., 2018). Some executive functioning skills in independent living include taking antipsychotic medications regularly and on-time, demonstrating self-sufficiency in personal hygiene and other routine tasks, regulating emotions, and performing house chores (Harvey et al., 2019; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). As a result, designing individualized social skills interventions encourages collaborative learning by means of helping to acquire social and executive functioning skills in peer interactions, managing stressors, and independent living.

The practicality of this third-tier approach relies on reinforcing the acquired social skills outside of schools. The reason is because of the importance of motivating children with the disorder on the continued success of the social skills interventions (Harvey et al., 2019; Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Accomplishing this priority also requires support of parents/legal guardians to reinforce the acquired social skills at home and other settings outside of schools, and hence to connect each acquired social skill in real-life situations (Brown, 2022), preparing children with the disorder for independence in adulthood. This strategy for reinforcement enriches the individualized social skills interventions in the context of parental care, which is the most reliable form of intervention for children with the disorder (Jameel et al., 2020). Furthermore, attaining independence in adulthood is the primary goal of individualized social skills interventions in schools (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Therefore, reinforcing the acquired social skills outside of schools provides the benefit of preparing for independence in adulthood.

Conclusion

Supporting children with early onset schizophrenia in schools is a challenging responsibility because of the chronic key characteristics of the disorder that have no known cure, inconsistencies in observed characteristics of the disorder among children that cause misdiagnosis and ambiguities between the disorder and its comorbidities, and limited efficacy of antipsychotic medication that leads to deficits in social and executive functioning. Responding to these challenges, educators are responsible for providing constant care and supervision in schools, addressing stereotypes and discriminations associated with the disorder, and designing individualized social skills interventions that help to overcome deficits related to the disorder. The approaches of organizing an inclusive classroom, facilitating a peer support group, and designing individualized social skills interventions help to respond to these challenges, and hence to improve the academic performance and social well-being of children with the disorder

in schools. These approaches correspond to the three-tiered model of Multi-Tiered System of Supports, whereas the practicality of these approaches relies on accomplishing necessary priorities through teamwork for children with the disorder to thrive in the classroom alongside peers, to build confidence in socializing with peers, and to prepare for independence in adulthood. Consequently, educators have the means to support children with the disorder in schools because of these practical approaches.

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As of this writing, Fritz Villanueva was in his last semester of Brandon University's Master of Education program, specializing in inclusive education. He enjoys writing poems, reading books over a cup of coffee, and spending quality time with family and friends, including his beloved cat. His personal goal is to further pursue graduate studies.

Systemic Supports for Teacher Well-Being

Alyssa Spacek

Abstract

This article considers how teacher well-being is critical to fostering effective pedagogy, meaningful student connections, and positive outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic, evolving best practices, and heightened expectations have emphasized the profession's challenges and the need to prioritize teacher wellness. Variables that greatly influence teacher well-being include workload, student needs, and leadership style. A comprehensive definition of well-being, coupled with interventions like mastery goals, mindfulness, and transformational leadership, will propel wellness into school culture and support the actualization of educational excellence.

Teacher well-being is a worthwhile investment. The recent COVID-19 pandemic, increased expectations from school communities, and transformative best practices have highlighted the challenges of the teaching profession and the importance of maintaining teacher well-being (Hartcher et al., 2023). As critical stakeholders in the school community, teachers' wellness matters and is directly tied to their pedagogical effectiveness, formation of student connections, and student outcomes (Lane et al., 2023). Developing a holistic definition of teacher well-being and understanding the current challenges that threaten it, such as volume of work, increasing student needs, and leadership style, will propel meaningful, long-term change (Hartcher et al., 2023). Interventions that make wellness part of the culture of school systems, such as mastery goals, mindfulness, and transformational leadership, will ensure a pathway forward (Hartcher et al., 2023). It is also essential that well-being solutions be implemented systemically if excellence in education is truly to be achieved.

Definition of Well-Being

Teacher well-being can be defined in a multitude of ways and is influenced by various individual, relational, and contextual factors (Hartcher et al., 2023). Past definitions of teacher wellness focused solely on negative aspects such as stress and burnout, whereas contemporary understandings of educator well-being now incorporate both subjective and objective views (Meidelina et al., 2023). Subjective well-being encompasses competence, life contentment, absence of emotional strain, presence of a positive mindset, and performing at peak efficiency (Bardach, 2021). Objective well-being refers to factors beyond the individual, such as capital resources, political landscape, vitality, and literacy (Meidelina et al., 2023). In this article, well-being is considered to encompass both subjective and objective features, and incorporates mental and physical aspects along with educators' sentiments, perspectives, and appraisals of their duties (Hartcher et al., 2023). Interventions that promote teacher well-being will achieve better outcomes when multi-dimensional wellness is considered.

Volume of Work

Teachers' well-being is directly tied to their workload, and their increasing volume of work poses major problems for schools. Current reports estimate that approximately 25% of teachers are considering leaving the profession due to extreme workloads that surpass contract hours and include non-teaching duties (Norton, 2021). These unreasonable volumes of work can be attributed to various influences, such as guidelines, protocols, expectations of student success, disproportionate student-teacher ratios, shortage of preparation time, and increased operational paperwork (Hartcher et al., 2023). Requirements to keep up to date with new learning platforms

and the continued demand for increased parent communication since the COVID-19 pandemic have also contributed to longer hours. Rising workload and preparatory time further inhibit opportunities to promote strong self-care and mental health habits in teachers. Even prior to the pandemic, unreasonable teacher workloads were being strongly associated with emotional exhaustion (Toropova et al., 2021, p. 90). Toropova et al.'s (2021) literature review also revealed that rising teacher stress and irritation can be attributed to new attention on performance and accountability, and increasing numbers of required tasks. The depth of many of the roles that teachers take on must also be factored in.

Overseeing and encouraging teachers' mastery goals can support their well-being as they navigate increasing workloads. Mastery goals build competency, develop understanding, enhance skills, and are associated with strong commitment and genuine engagement (Arduini-Van, 2020). Mastery goals prioritize self-improvement and personal growth. Research findings distinctly reveal that teachers who set mastery goals strengthen their professional drive and develop high-efficiency behaviours such as requesting assistance and participating in professional development (Lüftenegger & Muth, 2024). Teachers who operate from a goal-mastery approach also experience increased self-confidence, fortitude, job contentment, and involvement despite confronting professional challenges (Hartcher et al., 2023). Monitoring mastery goals can easily be implemented as part of teachers' yearly professional growth plan meetings because even simple conversations that involve reflection on goal progression can be used as development opportunities (Hoerr, 2014). Teachers' self-efficacy and competence will flourish as they overcome workload challenges and achieve their mastery goals.

Student Needs

Increasing student needs are another variable that contributes greatly to the intensity of teacher work and reduced well-being. Student behaviour is evolving in response to new challenges and is transforming classroom management expectations and traditional models of discipline in school. It is purported that a minimum of one third of school-age children will experience behavioural issues throughout their schooling (Ford et al., 2024). Likewise, child and adolescent mental health needs are at historically high levels and rising, and the recent pandemic has escalated these concerns further (Weist et al., 2023). The rate of student emotional and behavioural needs, along with increasing class sizes, ensures that teachers will frequently be required to manage difficult student behaviours. Teachers' feelings of efficacy in their management of misbehaviour and disruptions play a critical role in their well-being, with negative perceptions contributing notably to burnout (Bardach et al., 2021). In addition, teachers are now being charged with teaching mental health and social emotional curriculums meant to fill the gap left from lack of access to community services for youth (Weist et al., 2023). Continually having to manage difficult student behaviours and mental health concerns, including behaviours associated with traumatic experiences, can be emotionally taxing. Occasions to support educators emotionally should be considered if teacher well-being is to be maintained despite behavioural challenges.

Incorporating mindfulness strategies and curriculums into schools can support the intensity and perceptions of teacher work. Mindfulness, an awareness of being "in the present moment, non-judgmentally" has gained usage as an empirically supported approach to fostering mental health and wellness (Corthon et al., 2024, p. 2). Mindfulness techniques that are well-suited for educational settings include artistic outlets, breathing exercises, meditation, reflection breaks, affirmative self-talk, and humour (Johnson, 2022). Evidence-based studies highlight the merits of mindfulness, including lowering stress and cortisol levels, promoting life satisfaction, reducing mental health concerns, improving interpersonal connections, enriching perspective taking, and enhancing emotional regulation (Corthon et al., 2024). These personal wellness improvements also benefit teachers' effectiveness in the classroom.

Mindfulness techniques support teachers' efficacy while building students' social emotional toolboxes. Mindfulness supports improved decision making in response to arising complications in the classroom (Hartcher et al., 2023). Mindfulness provides critical opportunities for teachers to be empathetic, leading them to focus better on students' needs, build strong relationships, and improve their classroom management (Guidetti et al., 2019). Improvements to instruction and interactions can uplift teachers' sense of attainment, promote job contentment, and build self-competence (Hartcher et al., 2023). Implementing school-wide social emotional learning programs such as Thrival Kits or MindUP can be a vehicle to both teacher and student understanding of mindfulness and well-being (Canadian Mental Health Association, 2024; The Goldie Hawn Foundation, 2011). Benefits will emerge when students witness their teacher directly modelling awareness strategies through the delivery of mindfulness programming.

Leadership Style

The leadership style and quality of school administration also play a key role in teacher well-being. School leadership influences teacher feelings, welfare, and turnover rates (Hartcher et al., 2023). Teachers cannot flourish in closed leadership systems wherein decisions are made solely by administrators and communication is limited. Similarly, teacher resentment builds when micromanaging transactional leaders inhibit their autonomy and capacity. In fact, studies show a distinct correlation between teacher burnout and their principal's leadership approach (Hartcher et al., 2023). Furthermore, many teachers are placed or forced into administrative roles and encounter challenges in managing the demands of the job (Cann, 2020). Without sufficient preparation for the complexities of the role and adequate training, administrators are often unprepared to work with adults and lead the vision for a school (Cunningham, 2020). Lack of training also leaves many administrators ill equipped to assist their teachers, because educators now anticipate support beyond their professional needs with psychological and moral coaching (Hartcher et al., 2023). More team-orientated and supportive leadership approaches must be considered to guide teachers comprehensively.

An effective leader incorporates transformational leadership elements into their approach to promoting teacher well-being. Transformational leadership entails four behavioural elements: empowering motivation, exemplary leadership, critical engagement, and tailored attention (Li et al., 2024). This leadership philosophy can be defined as a framework for motivating development, inspiring teachers to better themselves, and strengthening operational processes (Meidelina et al., 2023). Transformational leaders propose collective goals while accepting varied perspectives and encouraging teacher involvement in accomplishing them (Hartcher et al., 2023). This method of leading is associated with numerous positive outcomes comprising a supportive work environment, trust in administrators, notable levels of overall health, mental wellness, and increased dedication (Li et al., 2024). Leadership style also has a direct impact on enhancing job fulfilment and minimizing teacher burnout (Hartcher et al., 2023). In addition, transformational leaders cultivate their own leadership competencies through motivating teachers to generate impressive results (Meidelina et al., 2023). Transformational leaders commit themselves to lifelong learning and grow their skills through collaborating with their colleagues and creating a culture wherein feedback is actively listened to and valued. These commitments can also help bridge the gap for new leaders as they become accustomed to the demands of their emerging role.

Culture of Well-Being

Mindfulness, goal mastery, and transformational leadership are among the diverse solutions that can be implemented to support teacher well-being, yet for them and other solutions to be successful they must be approached as a collective commitment and shift in culture (Hartcher et al., 2023). School organizations and leaders need to recognize that

personal well-being practices are inadequate by themselves because it is inconceivable for individual teachers to sustain their well-being through the effects of professional depletion, "moral injury and compassion fatigue" (Johnson, 2022, "Trauma" section, para. 2). Fundamental aspects of the educational setting, such as assessment and the command of student bodies, routinely put teachers in conditions where they are compelled to act on moral principles but where no just action is possible (Sugrue, 2020). Moreover, short-term responses will be ineffective in the long run unless they are embedded into a more comprehensive approach (Hartcher et al., 2023). Teacher well-being must be exemplified and directed with strategic foresight (Hartcher et al., 2023). Investments in systemically supporting wellness will enable teachers to sense the standards by which their organization promotes well-being for all (Johnson, 2022). School systems' protocols, policies, and professional development aimed at improving teacher well-being will inevitably extend to improve student wellness.

Conclusion

Growing expectations and the COVID-19 pandemic have called attention to the challenges of the teaching profession, and emphasized the impact that investing in teacher well-being will have on schools' abilities to achieve excellence. Numerous contextual and systemic variables exist for subjective and objective teacher welfare. Significant factors to consider include increased teacher workload, taxing student needs and behaviours, and the administrators' leadership style. Reflections on these variables must be undertaken to understand how to cultivate wellness effectively among teaching staff. Viable solutions include mastery goals, mindfulness practices, and transformational leadership. Investigations should also consider how to move beyond short-term fixes and make systemic changes, because a system that makes teacher well-being a priority will set the stage for students to thrive holistically.

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SPECIAL INTEREST PAPER

Supporting Trans Students in Prairie Rose School Division, Manitoba, Canada

Leslie Howard

The presence of trans students is becoming more commonplace in both urban and rural school settings, yet schools remain unprepared and inconsistent in their approach to supporting trans students. In many schools, trans youth must advocate for themselves (Horton, 2022), because schools are not prepared for their arrival. Most schools, in fact, address gender inclusion only following the "coming out" of a trans student (Martino et al., 2022). This reactionary approach to welcoming trans students (Davy & Cordoba, 2019) has left many vulnerable to attack via microaggressions, macroaggressions, and violence. This proves that despite progress in many spaces, transphobia is still present in many educational settings (Cumming-Potvin & Martino, 2018). A few years ago, I had the opportunity to work with a trans student as both his classroom teacher and interim principal. This experience reinforced the responsibility of governments, school divisions, and individual schools to ensure the safety and well-being of all students, especially those who identify as trans. Thankfully, proactive measures can be implemented at both the school division and school levels to cultivate an environment wherein trans students can thrive and have a positive experience throughout their educational journey.

The Negative Experiences of Trans Students in Schools

Microaggressions are "subtle interpersonal forms of bias that shape the daily lives" of trans students (McBride, 2020, p. 106). Microaggressions may include misgendering (Horton, 2022), the assumption that gender identity aligns with binary gender representation, demeaning insults, and the outward expression of discomfort with trans embodiment (McBride, 2020). The trans student I worked with faced daily microaggressions from his peers. Despite repeated requests from both him and his teachers, his classmates consistently refused to use his preferred pronouns and chosen name. This ongoing disrespect continued for two years, concluding in a painful moment at his graduation dinner, where he felt the need to leave after his classmates referred to him as "she/her" during the toast to the students. Experiences such as these create hostile school environments for trans students (McBride, 2020). When trans youth experience microaggressions consistently, they feel disconnected from their peers, and feel shame and distress. These consistent negative feelings can profoundly affect students' personal and academic lives.

Macroaggressions make trans youth invisible. Macroaggressions include a lack of trans representation in policies, non-inclusive curricula, and gendered buildings (McBride, 2021). When policies are written that do not keep trans students in mind, they enable individuals to make choices with prejudice (Horton, 2022). Student dress code policies often reflect this, especially in schools where students wear uniforms since they are frequently based on binary gender expression (McBride, 2021). In terms of curricula, trans youth often face exclusion, especially in overly gendered subjects such as physical education wherein sports are usually divided according to gender (Horton, 2022). Curricula can also be harmful when trans students do not see positive representation of gender-diverse characters in literature (McBride, 2021). The anti-trans movement's goal of banning books with gender-diverse characters is another macroaggressive attack on trans students' academic journey and personal growth (JusticeTrans, 2024). In addition to policy and curricula, school buildings pose a huge problem

for trans students. According to Ring (2024), approximately 20% of 1500 parents surveyed reported that their child's school did not set up appropriate restroom usage, and approximately one-third reported that their child was not given any direction concerning locker room usage (para. 4). At the K-12 school where I worked, there was a gender-neutral restroom located in the elementary hallway. This facility has been in place for four years, yet the current school leadership continues to receive phone calls and emails from parents expressing discomfort with their children using it. The trans student I taught was aware of the community's feelings regarding the gender-neutral bathroom, which only heightened his sense of isolation. Without appropriate plans in place, macroaggressions can easily go unchecked and negatively impact the daily lives of trans students.

Violence is a third way that trans students are made to feel unwanted in schools. Violence includes all verbal, physical, and online abuse that targets trans youth because of their gender identity (McBride, 2021). Trans students face discrimination and violence by both peers and adults in school settings (Horton, 2022). In 2005, Sausa found that 83% of trans youth in the U.S. reported having been physically harassed at school (as cited in McBride, 2021, p. 115). In 2017, Pedro and Esqueda found that 20.7% of trans youth in California had been threatened with a weapon (as cited in McBride, 2021, p. 115). Schools are very inconsistent in how they deal with students who act violently towards trans students. In some cases, the consequences can be minimal or nonexistent. Horton (2022) found that some schools did not act until parents contacted the police. Such perceived inaction made trans students and allies feel as though their school did not fully understand the realities trans students faced, making them feel even more isolated (Marzetti, 2018). I encountered this firsthand during my time as interim principal. Both my trans student and his parents repeatedly expressed their feelings of inadequate support from the school, particularly when his aggressors faced only minimal consequences for their actions. This situation highlighted the need for a more assertive approach in addressing and disciplining such behaviour. Failing to take action or implementing a lenient consequence towards those who act violently against trans students conveys the message that trans lives are less valuable than those of their cisgender peers.

One final way trans students are othered lies in the reactionary method most schools take to support trans students. In most instances, there are no plans in place before a trans student's arrival or "coming out." This is unfair to trans students for a couple of reasons. The first is that not all trans students want to come out publicly (Marine et al., 2019). Most institutions fully embrace a binary, cisnormative environment. The facilities have gendered washrooms and changerooms, classes do not feature characters that are nonbinary, and dress codes are both sexist and binary. A trans student who wants to come out is less likely to do this in such an environment. The second reason this is unfair to trans students is that it disrupts their educational experience. When my student came out as a trans male, I found myself uncertain about how to proceed. I recognized the urgency to act, yet I had to navigate this challenge mostly on my own. This led to a process of trial and error that only added to my student's difficulties at school. Additionally, the absence of established plans made it easier for parents and community members to influence my decisions negatively and undermine my leadership. As a result, not only did my student face hardships, but my colleagues also felt the impact. A reactionary approach to the presence of trans students is unacceptable; school divisions and schools must ensure they are prepared for all students, regardless of their individual needs.

Potential Solutions To Improve Trans Student Experiences in Schools

To combat the microaggressions that trans students face, trans students must be visibly supported, but many teachers are fearful when teaching trans students. For example, they are worried that they will say or do the wrong thing, especially concerning the use of pronouns (Davy & Cordoba, 2019). This is a valid concern since academic work can decline if teachers do not use chosen pronouns or names. Offering gender diversity professional development is one

way to combat this issue. A second way is ensuring that schools have inclusive groups and access to outside organizations. Supporting trans youth is multi-tiered. Trans students feel more included when teachers, students, parents, and the community are supportive. This is especially true for trans students in rural and remote locations (McBride, 2020). The school where I taught hosted a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), which became a vital support system for my trans student. During these meetings, he felt safe to express himself without the fear of mistreatment. The GSA also facilitated connections to external organizations such as the Rainbow Resource Centre (n.d.), Trans Manitoba (n.d.), and Two-Spirit Manitoba (n.d.). Furthermore, the GSA provided my student with the opportunity to take on a leadership role, empowering him to educate both staff and students through various awareness campaigns. Appropriate professional development, inclusive groups, and connections to outside resources are actions that my school division and the schools within it can implement to support trans students, their families, and their allies.

Addressing trans macroaggressions is often more complex than the solutions mentioned above. To combat macroaggressions, trans people must be represented in policy, curricula, and facilities. The current policies within Prairie Rose School Division (PRSD) lack inclusive language, indicating that they were crafted without consideration of gender diversity. Although PRSD has a Respect for Human Diversity Policy (Policy #18) that was approved in 2017 and last amended in 2022, it unfortunately does not provide any practical guidelines for implementation. Policy #18 is what Marine et al. (2019) would coin a “feel good” policy, because it appears to be 2SLGBTQ+ inclusive but gives no guidance to assist those whom the policy is intended (p. 226). Concerning curriculum, the first step is to identify the over-abundance of binary, cisnormative content (Davy & Cordoba, 2019). Once teachers have completed this, they can integrate trans and nonbinary content into their lessons. Fortunately, there are more resources containing gender-diverse characters than ever before, and resources can be found for all ages and grade levels. For example, Safe and Caring Schools – A Resource for Equity and Inclusion in Manitoba Schools (Egale Canada and Manitoba Education, 2012) contains many lesson ideas and resources to support teachers in this endeavour. Facility planning and usage is a third way schools can halt macroaggressions against trans students.

Of the three recommendations, the last proved to be the most complicated for me, especially as interim principal. Similar to Martino et al.’s (2022) observations, I discovered that while many parents and community members expressed support for protecting our trans student from harassment and abuse, there was considerable disagreement regarding the use of bathroom and changing facilities. Specifically, many opposed allowing trans students to access facilities that corresponded with their gender identity. Supporting Transgender and Gender Diverse Students in Manitoba Schools is a support document that lays out recommendations for facilities and facility usage. Regarding any gendered space or activity, this resource recommends that trans students be permitted to visit a space or attend an activity according to their gender identity (Manitoba Education and Training, 2017). For instance, if my student felt comfortable, he could have used the male bathroom or changing room. Additionally, had he participated in sports, he could have joined the boys' teams. The challenge, however, lies in the fact that these options are merely recommended resources rather than enforceable policies. I plan to petition my board to reevaluate Policy #18 to ensure it provides clear guidance on curricula and facilities from the perspective of gender diversity. I will suggest they consider Winnipeg School Division’s (2016) Policy IGABB and Louis Riel School Division’s (2024) Policy AC as models. While implementing a clear policy on gender inclusivity will not correct all the challenges faced by trans students in Prairie Rose School Division (PRSD) schools, it will improve their transition experience and affirm their sense of belonging within our educational community.

When combating violence against trans students, the message that abuse will not be tolerated must be consistent and followed through. Non-intervention is all too common for trans students. In fact, it has been found that trans students who stand up to perpetrators are more

likely to be disciplined than the perpetrators themselves (Orr & Baum, 2016), which is unacceptable. This inaction adds further trauma to students who already deal with trauma daily (McBride, 2020). There were numerous occasions when I had to address the behaviour of my trans male student's classmates. I met with individual students and addressed the entire class multiple times regarding their deliberate misuse of my student's preferred pronouns. I even reached out to some of these students' parents by phone and met a couple of parents in person. This situation continued until my student graduated. Having clear expectations and established processes to protect trans students would have greatly improved my student's experience. I plan to advocate for the board to provide school leaders with a comprehensive list of recommended actions to take against students who violate human rights, especially in relation to gender diversity.

The final area that requires attention is the proactive approach that most schools need to adopt in order to support trans students better. Schools that have included gender diversity in their school planning are in better positions to support trans students when they “come out” or become a part of the student population (Orr & Baum, 2016). By being proactive, schools are not only supporting trans students, but are also sending a message to other students, parents, and the community at large that microaggressions, macroaggressions, and violence are not welcome (Marzetti, 2018). Orr and Baum (2016) explained it best when they equated taking a proactive approach to trans inclusivity with fire prevention: instead of reacting to the presence of trans students often, it makes more sense for schools to promote an environment that celebrates gender inclusivity. With permission from senior administration, I plan to meet with school leaders to discuss plans they can put into place today to support trans students now, and in the future.

Conclusion

Trans students are often left to advocate for themselves because schools do not plan with trans students in mind. The persistent abuse that trans youth experience and the lack of policy that is truly inclusive contribute to transphobic practices that remain largely unchallenged in many settings (Horton, 2022). Trans students face microaggressions, macroaggressions, and violence – sometimes daily (McBride, 2021). Whether they have trans students in their buildings or not, schools and school divisions must change their policies, approach to teaching curricula, and facilities. Non-intervention profoundly impacts trans students (Marine et al., 2019). Shoshana Goldberg, the director of public education and research at the HRC Foundation, concluded that “the schools and systems of care around [trans students] are often falling short” (JusticeTrans, 2024, p. 3). There is never a good reason to violate human rights. Providing professional development for staff, connecting trans students to inclusive communities and resources, integrating gender-inclusivity into all curricula, ensuring facilities are accessible according to identified gender, and having clear expectations for staff and students will ensure a more positive experience for trans students. It is time to confront this issue, regardless of the potential awkwardness and level of difficulty. After all, being awkward is far less important than ensuring a safe learning environment for all.

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